

1 **Welcome Address August 26, 2022 9:30 a.m. LC 100**
2 **(also livestreamed via MediaSite)**
3

4 Good morning and welcome! I'm Darrell Wheeler and I'm humbled and
5 excited to say I have the privilege of being the ninth president of SUNY
6 New Paltz.

7 Coming into this room, in this new role and not as a candidate is
8 exhilarating. When I got up this morning and moved into my daily
9 routine, I was clear that this is not a routine day. I have this once in a
10 lifetime opportunity to join an academic community that I truly want to
11 be a part of in this leadership role. The things I learned about SUNY
12 New Paltz throughout the interview and onboarding processes come to
13 fruition today in a powerful way. As I look into this audience, I see
14 colleagues and partners, co-leaders in an endeavor to advance the
15 mission, prominence and success of this College. I thank you for this
16 opportunity and for the many warm welcomes I have received since
17 May. It is now time for me to engage with you in a new capacity and

18 initiate a journey of relationship and trust building, hard work and
19 enthusiastic engagement to build an even more vibrant SUNY New
20 Paltz. Thank you!

21 Today, I have the opportunity and great honor to welcome each of you
22 to the beginning of the 2022-23 Academic Year. I know that for the
23 past 12 years, under the watchful eyes and care of President Christian,
24 you have received a State of the College at this event. This year, with
25 the presidential transition, I will forgo a formal State of the College,
26 reserving this for a later time, but include updates on several current
27 College matters.

28 A special welcome is extended to all the newly hired faculty, staff and
29 administrators who are attending their first college-wide function
30 today. I look forward to getting to know you. We are part of a new
31 cohort of leaders who I know share my interest in taking this top-tier
32 *public* comprehensive college to the next level of excellence. We will be

33 on this journey together, marking milestones together. I look forward
34 to working with all of you.

35 Thank you to the faculty, staff, College Council members, Foundation
36 Board Directors, Alumni Council members, alumni, community
37 members and friends who are here today for this address and to those
38 watching via Livestream. As I am now the president, and thankfully, no
39 longer in interview mode, I wish to thank the members of the
40 Presidential search committee and so many of you who provided
41 feedback and insights on my journey through the vetting process. Your
42 passion for SUNY New Paltz was palpable, and I am absolutely elated to
43 be part of this community.

44 Finally, I'd like to thank my husband, Donovan Howard, for being there
45 through this journey over nearly 3 decades, and especially during this
46 leadership transition, and for his eagerness to embrace all things New
47 Paltz.

48

49 Our new academic year begins at a time of continued local, national
50 and world attention and engagement on endemics, pandemics and
51 other significant public health matters ... and any number of political
52 and social issues, including immigration, race, antisemitism, mass
53 violence, economic uncertainty, climate change and environmental
54 sustainability, free speech, hate speech, threats of emotional, mental
55 and physical violence, diversity, equity, justice and inclusion and this is
56 not, of course, an exhaustive list. It is appropriate that at this time we –
57 I -- place ourselves -- myself -- in the realization that the threats we face
58 are encapsulated in the complex realities of the historical events that
59 have brought us to this moment.

60

61 To that end, I want to acknowledge that the land we are on today is the
62 traditional territory of the Munsee, Esopus and Lenape tribes.

63

64 As a university community, we recognize the complexity of issues
65 surrounding these topics. We are committed to honest discussion and
66 the diverse views that come with such conversations, both in and out of
67 the classroom. We know these issues may impact the lives of students,
68 faculty, and staff throughout our campus community, even as we stay
69 focused on our core educational mission. Know also that we are
70 committed to being an inclusive learning environment where every
71 student from every background can learn, thrive and be fully a part of
72 our community.

73 At noon today, I'll be leading the cohort of new first-year and transfer
74 students through the welcome arch at Convocation – I'm looking
75 forward to making this rite of passage with our new students, and I
76 hope you will join me in welcoming and supporting them. I'm looking
77 forward to Professor Glenn Geher's faculty address to our newest
78 students and junior Allyson Sheneman of Grand Rapids, Michigan, who

79 started her New Paltz education in fall 2020 at the height of COVID, will
80 share a student message with her peers.

81 But this morning I would like to talk about three things in this my
82 opening address at my new academic home:

83 1. I want to speak to what I see as the core mission of SUNY New
84 Paltz and WHY this is so important to me;

85 2. I want to address the context of higher education and how we
86 move forward in a world touched by those issues I just
87 mentioned but are worth repeating -- economic and social
88 unrest, a national cultural divide, wars...an ongoing pandemic,
89 new global pandemics and syndemics.

90 3. (Third and Finally) In lieu of claiming a fully developed and
91 contoured vision for a school and community I am still coming
92 to know, I want to express, top priorities that I will need to
93 engage, as I move through the next 30-60-90-120 and 180
94 days.

95 In doing this, I hope to provide you some sense of what I have been
96 doing, how I have been going about it, and what you might expect from
97 me during this year and beyond.

98

99 Let's get started!

100 CORE MISSION

101 A. SUNY New Paltz is an amazing place, a place of pride, excitement,
102 and opportunity for so many students, alumni, and community
103 members. It is a place of intellectual and creative vitality guided
104 by the faculty and professional staff across this campus
105 community. As an institution of higher education and a public
106 institution within the State University System of New York, we
107 have a great privilege and responsibility to provide pathways to
108 degree/certificates and to be a value to the citizens of the state.
109 In effect, this is our reason for being and absolutely a driver of my
110 enthusiasm for seeking this post.

111 As some of you here today may recall, in my application letter and
112 interview, I commented on how I carry a copy of the University
113 Mission Statement with me to provide a constant reminder of
114 why I am “at work today.” Well, here it is. I wanted the New Paltz
115 mission statement to fit inside the cover with a bit more margin
116 area, but we’ll work on that together. My point here is that our
117 strength, and dare I say, our future, lies in the ability of this
118 community to deliver on the promises of educational
119 opportunities and community engagement. This is not a slogan
120 for me. This, and particularly in these uncharted times for higher
121 education, are words that have to be followed with actions and I
122 trust you will agree, that the action that must take place will
123 emerge from the people who make up this vibrant academic
124 community. In my worldview, we, SUNY New Paltz, have two
125 clear goals (my compass north as president) that are intimately
126 linked to our mission and institutional charter:

127 a. First, the unique privilege and role extended to higher
128 education institutions of conferring degrees, certificates,
129 and credentials upon satisfactory completion of required
130 content, and our unique roles as instructors, mentors,
131 facilitators, and supporters for guiding our students to
132 these points of completion.

133 b. Second, actively addressing problems, needs and
134 solutions of importance to the local community, region,
135 state, nation and world – not just through what we say,
136 think and write, but what we do. How we engage with
137 our partners. How we encourage our students to engage
138 with their communities as part of their learning as we
139 prepare them to be engaged citizens after they leave us.
140 These are already thing(s) we are known for, and I see
141 even more opportunities to shine the spotlight on why
142 SUNY New Paltz is still one of the “HOTTEST College’s in
143 the Country”!

144 B. Higher Education the Context –

145 If you, and I fully suspect you all have, kept current with the
146 opportunities and challenges facing higher education today, you may
147 be asking fundamental questions related to the future of higher
148 education. I know that I ask myself these questions often!

149 These are dynamic if not unparalleled times in higher education and
150 across the K-12 educational landscape. From the political debates on
151 content that should, can or will be included or excluded, to economic
152 hurdles in financing education to the devolution of morale among the
153 ranks of educators. We grapple with new ways of visioning our roles
154 and value within an ecosystem that increasingly expects market
155 valuation of the “return on investment” by students, parents, donors,
156 and third-party partners. Today’s academic landscape requires
157 attention to all these forces while keeping true to its primary mission of
158 educating its students and advancing scholarship, creative and
159 performing excellence.

160 The picture for the future of higher education is not without hope;
161 however, this hope must be linked to creative, engaged and actionable
162 steps that revitalize commitments harnessing the power of education
163 to lead and to address an array of complex social, economic, political,
164 environmental, and health issues, problems and opportunities. This will
165 require all of us, from our newest members to our most senior
166 colleagues, from faculty to facilities' team members, to join in this
167 work. This will be a time that demands "a renewed commitment to a
168 true higher education that can help to heal" a divided nation, as written
169 in Will Bunch's book, "After the Ivory Tower Falls." These words ring so
170 true for me, and as I begin this journey, with you, I am eager to engage
171 in strategic discussions across the campus on ways we can be leaders in
172 this national process of re-invigorating confidence in the value of higher
173 education.

174 To accomplish this, your participation in this presidency is vital. Yes,
175 there is one president at a point in time, but there are numerous

176 stakeholders and partners – you, my new colleagues who are essential
177 components to our future growth. I realize that making a leadership
178 transition requires communication, relationship-, and trust-building.
179 These are earned and require presence, persistence, and engagement.
180 In the weeks and months ahead, I look forward to meeting individually
181 and/or in smaller groups so that we can find these paths to create the
182 relationships that will make our work together possible.

183 As we come out of the deepest grasps of the COVID-related isolation
184 chambers, and recalibrate the “new” normal, much attention has been
185 given to the educational, emotional, and physical toll on our students
186 and the need for educational environments to prepare to meet the
187 needs of our new and returning learners. This is absolutely the case.

188 AND! To do this properly, we have to consider the people who create
189 and provide these educational opportunities. Yes, each and every one
190 of you here in person or watching this remotely. We will and must find
191 ways to support one another and develop opportunities for

192 engagement, healing, reconciliation, and rejuvenation. We cannot
193 expect to get the best of our team without demonstrating the humanity
194 and care we expect them to extend to our students. Our work is clearly
195 cut out for us, but I believe, -- no, I more than believe -- I am confident
196 that collectively the answers, the will and the hands are here!

197 C. What have I been doing these first 30-days?

198 Building upon the legacy of my predecessors and their leadership teams
199 and the special talents, commitment, hard work and success of
200 generations of faculty, staff, students, alumni, volunteers, friends and
201 governance leaders, my goal is to continue building toward new levels
202 of success, recognition, and resources.

203 On my first day in the office in mid-July, I talked with three of the past
204 presidents – Alice Chandler, Roger Bowen, and Steve Poskanzer. I had
205 weekly calls with my predecessor Don Christian from the point of my
206 appointment in early May through my start on July 18. He (and let me
207 not omit Sandy) could not have made this transition any smoother. In

208 this presidential transition, Don was generous with his time and his
209 insights, and I thank him for his support during these past few months.

210 During the search process and in my first 30 days in office – actually
211 today marks 40-days, but who is counting?! – I have been on a steep
212 learning curve and actively engaged in readings, experiential learning
213 and active communications– many of these with people joining us
214 today.

215 1) I've been reading strategic transition documents prepared by
216 Don, the President's Cabinet and the Academic Leadership (an amazing
217 welcoming and supportive team I might add), and, of course, the latest
218 Middle States accreditation report.

219 2) Daily, I'm walking around campus and exploring the village and
220 town, having conversations with those I encounter and getting
221 acquainted with individuals and the specialness of New Paltz – a place
222 that caught my interest when I read of this leadership opportunity and
223 was confirmed during the interview process.

224 3) With a heavy heart, I attended the formal farewell for New
225 Paltz Officer Daniel Carpinelli and provided a formal statement
226 regarding the loss of undergraduate Kailas Ferrari.

227 4) I attended the American Association of State Colleges and
228 Universities New President's Academy in late July and will continue to
229 participate this fall in orientation sessions with this cohort of new
230 presidents from across the country.

231 D. Among my top priorities in the first 180 days of my presidency:

232 1. Listening and Learning

233 i. I've spoken with College Council members, the faculty
234 presiding officer, and Student Association president,
235 and look forward to meeting in the coming weeks with
236 other leaders in our shared governance structure.

237 ii. I've met with the Academic Deans and other Academic
238 Leaders, who along with our faculty, are so core to our
239 ability to offer a world-class academic experience.

- 240 iii. I hit the ground running – introducing myself to our
241 elected and other government officials at local, county,
242 state and federal levels and discussing ways we can
243 partner and garner their support for our endeavors.
- 244 iv. I've met many donors and friends of the College and
245 will meet many more this fall to understand why they
246 support us and how they want to continue to partner
247 with us to support our endeavors and the success of
248 our students.
- 249 v. I've attended orientation events for students and their
250 families including EOP, transfer student orientation,
251 Move-in Day, RD and RA sessions and I pop into offices
252 to say "hi" as I walked (more like, got lost) across
253 campus.
- 254 vi. Now that everyone is returning, I am embarking on a
255 listening tour with administrative and academic units

256 across campus, (including a meeting with our UPD
257 advisory board). I want to learn more about your points
258 of pride, your challenges and opportunities for your
259 teams and your units. I have asked the Presidential
260 search committee and they have graciously agreed, to
261 serve as “ambassadors” to make sure I am meeting the
262 people and teams across this campus and to hold me to
263 the commitment I made during the interview to be a
264 present President!

265 My priorities of course must anchor to the core mission, as I described
266 earlier, our commitment to student success and value to our
267 community. In this area, we have powerful resources in our Academics,
268 Student Affairs and Enrollment Management divisions. Each of which
269 touches students on a daily basis. Your work in these areas is critical
270 but also depends on the strength of our Administration and Finance,
271 Development and Alumni Relations and Foundation, and Human

272 Resources, Diversity and Inclusion, and Communication divisions. I
273 hope you see where I am going with this. It truly takes a village to
274 accomplish the task of creating, supporting, leading, nurturing, and
275 sustaining our beloved SUNY New Paltz. If I have not conveyed this
276 clearly enough, let me risk redundancy: This is not the work of one
277 person or one division; this work requires engagement, and mutual
278 support and respect for the collective. In no small way, all of us have a
279 unique role to play in the success of this institution and accountability
280 for the legacy yet to be written.

281 2. Understanding and advancing our fiscal well-being

282 *i.* Budgetarily, we face fiscal impediments, as do many of
283 our academic peers across the country. We're facing
284 unprecedented demands on our resources, including
285 real wage compression, inflation, supply-chain issues
286 and global forces that impact our interconnected
287 economies. In the coming weeks, I will continue to

288 work with our VP for Administration and Finance,
289 Cabinet, Deans, and Shared Governance partners to
290 better understand our fiscal position and engage our
291 community in a process of programming, planning, and
292 budgeting. More to come on this, most certainly.

293 3. Academic Leadership

294 i. I thank Barbara Lyman for her interim leadership and
295 willingness to stay on until we can hire a new Provost,
296 and I thank members of the Provost's Office for their
297 unwavering commitment to SUNY New Paltz. As a
298 recent Provost myself, and one who inherited a post
299 that had 5-interims in as many years, I understand
300 both the need for and the impact of stability in the
301 Chief Academic Officer's post. I am pleased to
302 announce that:

303 1. We have re-engaged with our search firm, and
304 we'll be working with a new consultant from

305 Academic Search whom I've worked with
306 successfully in the past.

307 2. Met with the Provost Search committee to hear
308 what worked and what didn't work the first time.
309 Vice President for Enrollment Management Jeff
310 Gant has agreed to co-chair, and we are finalizing
311 the committee membership in accordance with
312 campus policies and procedures. I will be looking
313 for a new faculty co-chair. (*Please send*
314 *nominations to Shelly Wright by September 2,*
315 *2022*).

316 3. We will launch the provost search as soon as we
317 have a full committee. In my initial discussion
318 with the committee, my number one request in a
319 qualified candidate is that this person be
320 committed to the work of SUNY New Paltz and to

321 not have this be a steppingstone to something
322 else!

323 ii. Managing the next phases of health challenges: SUNY
324 New Paltz has done a fantastic job addressing COVID
325 and having been part of the leadership on COVID at
326 Iona, I thank the campus community for its great work.
327 I wish I could say COVID is in our rear-view mirror, but
328 we all know that's not the case. We also have Monkey
329 pox, polio, measles – who knows what might be next –
330 this is a real component of the higher education
331 landscape today. This, too, we can handle with a team
332 such as this!

333 iii. Recognizing the social unrest in our country, the
334 political divide, the rise of hate speech and acts of
335 violence based on race, economics, religion or
336 LGBTQIA+ status; war in Ukraine and the unique role
337 that universities play in contributing to solutions not

338 least of which by modeling inclusive behaviors and
339 policies. And it aligns with SUNY-wide and the
340 Governor's goals and my own values and professional
341 work. As a community we have been challenged on
342 many fronts over the past several years from racial
343 tensions, antisemitism, inter-partner violence...and
344 more. And I am proud to join SUNY New Paltz in
345 committing to combating the horrific manifestations of
346 incivility, violence and hate and most profoundly in our
347 capacity to take action and not just talk about it. We
348 embody the core of taking a stance and making more
349 than safe spaces but living forward in brave spaces.

350 As one example SUNY New Paltz, you developed a plan to rename
351 buildings and implemented it. – you can do this, too! Together, we can,
352 and together we are greater than I!

353 iv. Enrollment management - This year, we will welcome
354 more than 1150 new freshmen. This number continues
355 to represent significant interest in SUNY New Paltz
356 from our traditional undergraduate population.
357 Graduate student enrollments are also on the rise with
358 a 13% increase in incoming graduate students and a
359 6% increase in total graduate students registered for
360 the fall. Not all of the enrollment news is positive,
361 though. The pandemic continues to create hardship for
362 our students as marked by the 4% drop in returning
363 students this year. Many of our students signal
364 financial issues, which have been exacerbated by the
365 pandemic, as a top reason for not returning. With
366 enrollments remaining depressed at our local
367 community college partners, new transfer student
368 registrations are also lower than expected. Instead of
369 the 650 transfer students we had planned to recruit for

370 this fall semester, we will welcome a slightly smaller
371 cohort of about 620. Recruitment and retention are
372 everyone's job on a college campus. And our collective
373 effort will be critical to our continuing success as we
374 face traditional enrollment challenges, including a
375 demographic cliff in the near term.

376 v. With all of this in play, there are a few tactical (shorter
377 term) items that have come forward that I believe are
378 well worthwhile bringing to your attention:

379 1. Provost search- as previously mentioned, this is
380 in motion.

381 2. University designation – In January, NYS Regents
382 reclassified University designation. In this
383 redesignation, SUNY New Paltz qualifies as a
384 university with NO change to its mission, teaching
385 loads, research obligations, etc... In many ways
386 this is recognition of the outstanding work

387 already done by the campus. Across NYS, many
388 colleges that meet the new criteria are filing for
389 the University designation. In fact, all but two of
390 the SUNY comprehensives are eligible because of
391 the graduate degrees they offer, and they are all
392 seeking the designation. I am actively in
393 discussion with my colleagues and will be
394 consulting with the College Council and the
395 Faculty Senate about the possibility of doing the
396 same. There is little cost other than a filing fee
397 and no need to change out signage because we
398 will still be SUNY New Paltz. This is not an effort
399 to become a university center. We are a regional
400 public comprehensive that meets the NYS
401 threshold for university designation and will
402 remain so.

403 3. Faculty hires – we're moving forward with the
404 Provost and Deans, and I am pleased to say that
405 we have designated full-time tenure-track hires
406 and the Provost will be in touch with the Deans
407 very shortly with next step details.

408 Again, even these shorter-term priorities recognize the
409 interconnectedness of our roles and the need for strategic alignments
410 that strengthen our capacities!

411

412 I've spoken today about what I believe is A) the core mission of SUNY
413 New Paltz, B) context of challenges and opportunities in higher
414 education; and C) my first 180 days in office.

415 As we move through this period, which will bring us to the presidential
416 inauguration activities the week of April 17, I look forward to engaging
417 with you and building on SUNY New Paltz's nearly 200-year inclusive
418 history of academic, creative and community engagement excellence.

419 As I noted earlier, my perspective, and I hope you can share in the
420 enthusiasm I have for this, is that we exist to advance access,
421 persistence, excellence, and completion of credentials for our students;
422 and to have a positive impact on New York and beyond. The ways we
423 achieve these goals are not and should not be mutually exclusive. The
424 work we do as a team from across the divisions, units and departments
425 work in tandem to produce successes that no one unit can produce. To
426 this point, I'd like to share with you a brief video that underscores the
427 power and passion of what we do for academic success and community
428 impact.

429 As you can see from this video, what you do impacts students, their
430 families and their communities. It has been my honor to welcome you
431 and to be welcomed by you today. Thank you, SUNY New Paltz Hawks,
432 I hope to see many of you at Convocation as we launch this new
433 academic year and a new chapter in the life of our campus. Let us
434 begin...