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

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

Coming into this room, in this new role and not as a candidate is exhilarating. When I got up this morning and moved into my daily routine, I was clear that this is not a routine day. I have this once in a lifetime opportunity to join an academic community that I truly want to be a part of in this leadership role. The things I learned about SUNY New Paltz throughout the interview and onboarding processes come to fruition today in a powerful way. As I look into this audience, I see colleagues and partners, co-leaders in an endeavor to advance the mission, prominence and success of this College. I thank you for this opportunity and for the many warm welcomes I have received since May. It is now time for me to engage with you in a new capacity and
initiate a journey of relationship and trust building, hard work and enthusiastic engagement to build an even more vibrant SUNY New Paltz. Thank you!

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

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

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

Finally, I’d like to thank my husband, Donovan Howard, for being there
through this journey over nearly 3 decades, and especially during this
leadership transition, and for his eagerness to embrace all things New
Paltz.
Our new academic year begins at a time of continued local, national and world attention and engagement on endemics, pandemics and other significant public health matters ... and any number of political and social issues, including immigration, race, antisemitism, mass violence, economic uncertainty, climate change and environmental sustainability, free speech, hate speech, threats of emotional, mental and physical violence, diversity, equity, justice and inclusion and this is not, of course, an exhaustive list. It is appropriate that at this time we – I -- place ourselves -- myself -- in the realization that the threats we face are encapsulated in the complex realities of the historical events that have brought us to this moment.

To that end, I want to acknowledge that the land we are on today is the traditional territory of the Munsee, Esopus and Lenape tribes.
As a university community, we recognize the complexity of issues surrounding these topics. We are committed to honest discussion and the diverse views that come with such conversations, both in and out of the classroom. We know these issues may impact the lives of students, faculty, and staff throughout our campus community, even as we stay focused on our core educational mission. Know also that we are committed to being an inclusive learning environment where every student from every background can learn, thrive and be fully a part of our community.

At noon today, I’ll be leading the cohort of new first-year and transfer students through the welcome arch at Convocation – I’m looking forward to making this rite of passage with our new students, and I hope you will join me in welcoming and supporting them. I’m looking forward to Professor Glenn Geher’s faculty address to our newest students and junior Allyson Sheneman of Grand Rapids, Michigan, who
started her New Paltz education in fall 2020 at the height of COVID, will
share a student message with her peers.

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

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

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

3. (Third and Finally) In lieu of claiming a fully developed and
   contoured vision for a school and community I am still coming
   to know, I want to express, top priorities that I will need to
   engage, as I move through the next 30-60-90-120 and 180
days.
In doing this, I hope to provide you some sense of what I have been doing, how I have been going about it, and what you might expect from me during this year and beyond.

Let’s get started!

CORE MISSION

A. SUNY New Paltz is an amazing place, a place of pride, excitement, and opportunity for so many students, alumni, and community members. It is a place of intellectual and creative vitality guided by the faculty and professional staff across this campus community. As an institution of higher education and a public institution within the State University System of New York, we have a great privilege and responsibility to provide pathways to degree/certificates and to be a value to the citizens of the state. In effect, this is our reason for being and absolutely a driver of my enthusiasm for seeking this post.
As some of you here today may recall, in my application letter and interview, I commented on how I carry a copy of the University Mission Statement with me to provide a constant reminder of why I am “at work today.” Well, here it is. I wanted the New Paltz mission statement to fit inside the cover with a bit more margin area, but we’ll work on that together. My point here is that our strength, and dare I say, our future, lies in the ability of this community to deliver on the promises of educational opportunities and community engagement. This is not a slogan for me. This, and particularly in these uncharted times for higher education, are words that have to be followed with actions and I trust you will agree, that the action that must take place will emerge from the people who make up this vibrant academic community. In my worldview, we, SUNY New Paltz, have two clear goals (my compass north as president) that are intimately linked to our mission and institutional charter:
a. First, the unique privilege and role extended to higher education institutions of conferring degrees, certificates, and credentials upon satisfactory completion of required content, and our unique roles as instructors, mentors, facilitators, and supporters for guiding our students to these points of completion.

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

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

These are dynamic if not unparalleled times in higher education and across the K-12 educational landscape. From the political debates on content that should, can or will be included or excluded, to economic hurdles in financing education to the devolution of morale among the ranks of educators. We grapple with new ways of visioning our roles and value within an ecosystem that increasingly expects market valuation of the “return on investment” by students, parents, donors, and third-party partners. Today’s academic landscape requires attention to all these forces while keeping true to its primary mission of educating its students and advancing scholarship, creative and performing excellence.
The picture for the future of higher education is not without hope; however, this hope must be linked to creative, engaged and actionable steps that revitalize commitments harnessing the power of education to lead and to address an array of complex social, economic, political, environmental, and health issues, problems and opportunities. This will require all of us, from our newest members to our most senior colleagues, from faculty to facilities’ team members, to join in this work. This will be a time that demands “a renewed commitment to a true higher education that can help to heal” a divided nation, as written in Will Bunch’s book, “After the Ivory Tower Falls.” These words ring so true for me, and as I begin this journey, with you, I am eager to engage in strategic discussions across the campus on ways we can be leaders in this national process of re-invigorating confidence in the value of higher education.

To accomplish this, your participation in this presidency is vital. Yes, there is one president at a point in time, but there are numerous
stakeholders and partners – you, my new colleagues who are essential components to our future growth. I realize that making a leadership transition requires communication, relationship-, and trust-building. These are earned and require presence, persistence, and engagement.

In the weeks and months ahead, I look forward to meeting individually and/or in smaller groups so that we can find these paths to create the relationships that will make our work together possible.

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

AND! To do this properly, we have to consider the people who create and provide these educational opportunities. Yes, each and every one of you here in person or watching this remotely. We will and must find ways to support one another and develop opportunities for
engagement, healing, reconciliation, and rejuvenation. We cannot
expect to get the best of our team without demonstrating the humanity
and care we expect them to extend to our students. Our work is clearly
cut out for us, but I believe, -- no, I more than believe -- I am confident
that collectively the answers, the will and the hands are here!

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

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

On my first day in the office in mid-July, I talked with three of the past
presidents – Alice Chandler, Roger Bowen, and Steve Poskanzer. I had
weekly calls with my predecessor Don Christian from the point of my
appointment in early May through my start on July 18. He (and let me
not omit Sandy) could not have made this transition any smoother. In
this presidential transition, Don was generous with his time and his insights, and I thank him for his support during these past few months. During the search process and in my first 30 days in office – actually today marks 40-days, but who is counting?! – I have been on a steep learning curve and actively engaged in readings, experiential learning and active communications– many of these with people joining us today.

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

2) Daily, I’m walking around campus and exploring the village and town, having conversations with those I encounter and getting acquainted with individuals and the specialness of New Paltz – a place that caught my interest when I read of this leadership opportunity and was confirmed during the interview process.
3) With a heavy heart, I attended the formal farewell for New Paltz Officer Daniel Carpinelli and provided a formal statement regarding the loss of undergraduate Kailas Ferrari.

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

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

1. Listening and Learning

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

ii. I’ve met with the Academic Deans and other Academic Leaders, who along with our faculty, are so core to our ability to offer a world-class academic experience.
iii. I hit the ground running – introducing myself to our elected and other government officials at local, county, state and federal levels and discussing ways we can partner and garner their support for our endeavors.

iv. I’ve met many donors and friends of the College and will meet many more this fall to understand why they support us and how they want to continue to partner with us to support our endeavors and the success of our students.

v. I’ve attended orientation events for students and their families including EOP, transfer student orientation, Move-in Day, RD and RA sessions and I pop into offices to say “hi” as I walked (more like, got lost) across campus.

vi. Now that everyone is returning, I am embarking on a listening tour with administrative and academic units
across campus, (including a meeting with our UPD advisory board). I want to learn more about your points of pride, your challenges and opportunities for your teams and your units. I have asked the Presidential search committee and they have graciously agreed, to serve as “ambassadors” to make sure I am meeting the people and teams across this campus and to hold me to the commitment I made during the interview to be a present President!

My priorities of course must anchor to the core mission, as I described earlier, our commitment to student success and value to our community. In this area, we have powerful resources in our Academics, Student Affairs and Enrollment Management divisions. Each of which touches students on a daily basis. Your work in these areas is critical but also depends on the strength of our Administration and Finance, Development and Alumni Relations and Foundation, and Human
Resources, Diversity and Inclusion, and Communication divisions. I hope you see where I am going with this. It truly takes a village to accomplish the task of creating, supporting, leading, nurturing, and sustaining our beloved SUNY New Paltz. If I have not conveyed this clearly enough, let me risk redundancy: This is not the work of one person or one division; this work requires engagement, and mutual support and respect for the collective. In no small way, all of us have a unique role to play in the success of this institution and accountability for the legacy yet to be written.

2. Understanding and advancing our fiscal well-being

   i. Budgetarily, we face fiscal impediments, as do many of our academic peers across the country. We’re facing unprecedented demands on our resources, including real wage compression, inflation, supply-chain issues and global forces that impact our interconnected economies. In the coming weeks, I will continue to
work with our VP for Administration and Finance, Cabinet, Deans, and Shared Governance partners to better understand our fiscal position and engage our community in a process of programming, planning, and budgeting. More to come on this, most certainly.

3. Academic Leadership

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

1. We have re-engaged with our search firm, and we’ll be working with a new consultant from
2. Met with the Provost Search committee to hear what worked and what didn’t work the first time. Vice President for Enrollment Management Jeff Gant has agreed to co-chair, and we are finalizing the committee membership in accordance with campus policies and procedures. I will be looking for a new faculty co-chair. (*Please send nominations to Shelly Wright by September 2, 2022*).

3. We will launch the provost search as soon as we have a full committee. In my initial discussion with the committee, my number one request in a qualified candidate is that this person be committed to the work of SUNY New Paltz and to
not have this be a steppingstone to something else!

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

iii. Recognizing the social unrest in our country, the political divide, the rise of hate speech and acts of violence based on race, economics, religion or LGBTQIA+ status; war in Ukraine and the unique role that universities play in contributing to solutions not
least of which by modeling inclusive behaviors and
policies. And it aligns with SUNY-wide and the
Governor’s goals and my own values and professional
work. As a community we have been challenged on
many fronts over the past several years from racial
tensions, antisemitism, inter-partner violence…and
more. And I am proud to join SUNY New Paltz in
committing to combating the horrific manifestations of
incivility, violence and hate and most profoundly in our
capacity to take action and not just talk about it. We
embody the core of taking a stance and making more
than safe spaces but living forward in brave spaces.

As one example SUNY New Paltz, you developed a plan to rename
buildings and implemented it. – you can do this, too! Together, we can,
and together we are greater than I!
iv. Enrollment management - This year, we will welcome more than 1150 new freshmen. This number continues to represent significant interest in SUNY New Paltz from our traditional undergraduate population. Graduate student enrollments are also on the rise with a 13% increase in incoming graduate students and a 6% increase in total graduate students registered for the fall. Not all of the enrollment news is positive, though. The pandemic continues to create hardship for our students as marked by the 4% drop in returning students this year. Many of our students signal financial issues, which have been exacerbated by the pandemic, as a top reason for not returning. With enrollments remaining depressed at our local community college partners, new transfer student registrations are also lower than expected. Instead of the 650 transfer students we had planned to recruit for
this fall semester, we will welcome a slightly smaller cohort of about 620. Recruitment and retention are everyone’s job on a college campus. And our collective effort will be critical to our continuing success as we face traditional enrollment challenges, including a demographic cliff in the near term.

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

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

2. University designation – In January, NYS Regents reclassified University designation. In this redesignation, SUNY New Paltz qualifies as a university with NO change to its mission, teaching loads, research obligations, etc... In many ways this is recognition of the outstanding work
already done by the campus. Across NYS, many colleges that meet the new criteria are filing for the University designation. In fact, all but two of the SUNY comprehensives are eligible because of the graduate degrees they offer, and they are all seeking the designation. I am actively in discussion with my colleagues and will be consulting with the College Council and the Faculty Senate about the possibility of doing the same. There is little cost other than a filing fee and no need to change out signage because we will still be SUNY New Paltz. This is not an effort to become a university center. We are a regional public comprehensive that meets the NYS threshold for university designation and will remain so.
3. Faculty hires – we’re moving forward with the Provost and Deans, and I am pleased to say that we have designated full-time tenure-track hires and the Provost will be in touch with the Deans very shortly with next step details.

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

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

As we move through this period, which will bring us to the presidential inauguration activities the week of April 17, I look forward to engaging with you and building on SUNY New Paltz’s nearly 200-year inclusive history of academic, creative and community engagement excellence.
As I noted earlier, my perspective, and I hope you can share in the enthusiasm I have for this, is that we exist to advance access, persistence, excellence, and completion of credentials for our students; and to have a positive impact on New York and beyond. The ways we achieve these goals are not and should not be mutually exclusive. The work we do as a team from across the divisions, units and departments work in tandem to produce successes that no one unit can produce. To this point, I’d like to share with you a brief video that underscores the power and passion of what we do for academic success and community impact.

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