

Good afternoon. Thank you all for the warm welcome. I see many familiar faces in the audience, and it will be my pleasure to get to know more of you as we interact in the days, weeks, and months that will follow today's address. As was stated during the introduction, The University of Akron is home for me. Not only is it my educational home—the place where I received excellent in-classroom instruction, participated in the professional development opportunities that shaped my professional career, and ultimately granted my two degrees, but it's also been my “work home” for the past two years and nine months. To that end, I stand before you today extremely honored and also humbled to speak to you as the 19th president of The University of Akron. I'd like to recognize and thank the members of the UA Board of Trustees and UA Foundation who are present here today.

As one of the very few presidents at institutions across the country who actually have the opportunity to lead at their alma mater, the concept of my alumnus status has been something I've been thinking about with some frequency. I actually looked for statistics about college and university presidents who have returned to their alma maters in the presidential role, but I was unable to find anything conclusive. Nevertheless, the history and words of UA's alma mater, and how it relates to me as a proud alumnus, have been top of mind for me as I've contemplated my past, grasped my present professional opportunity, and considered what the future of this place can and should be. I found out that the University's alma mater is based on a song originally composed in 1857, and its lyrics were added in 1909 by my predecessor, or in this case ancestor, then-president Augustus Church.

“Close beside Cuyahoga's waters, Stream of
amber hue,
O'er old Buchtel Summit's glory, Waves the
gold and blue.

Hail we Akron! Sound her praises, Speed
them on the gale,
Ever stand our Alma Mater, Akron hail, all
hail!”

For 154 years, The University of Akron has been shaped into the great institution that it is today. As president, I view it as my responsibility to lead us from where we are currently into an even greater future. The University of Akron in its present day is a 218-acre insular campus in the middle of a thriving city. Our geographical footprint extends via branch campuses and centers in two additional counties. Our online and remote programs are unbounded by required travel. Steps from our main campus perimeter are hundreds of corporations and nonprofit organizations, industries that drive technology and transportation, cultural opportunities that rival the offerings of much larger and much more populated urban centers across the nation, and much, much more.

Indeed, The University of Akron *is* much more. We are more than our 218-acre footprint. We are the intellectual center—a youthful and unique heartbeat—of the surrounding city that relies on us to educate the future leaders of the corporations, nonprofits, industries, and cultural gathering places I mentioned before. We are the collective stories of nearly 200,000 alumni. We are the groundbreaking research of our brilliant faculty. We are a four-year, or more, investment of our current students—students to whom we owe the product we've promised.

As of today, I've been UA's president for just 112 days so, as you might expect, the task of a State of the University address was a daunting challenge for me. After all, I'm still in the middle of a listening tour—a

tour aimed at learning all I can about our people and our programs and everything in between. During the past three months, UA stakeholders of all types have shared with me background information, current applications, and future implications of where The University of Akron has been, how they view it now, and certainly inspirational opinions about our limitless potential.

While I do have institutional memory of this place, I know there are many individuals here with far more. There are innovators who have shaped our identity. There are lifelong learners who crave the intellectual focus of the academy. There are fierce competitors in athletics and arenas of the mind. And there are both students and colleagues who simply “stuck it out” for the promise of a brighter future. The idea of a brighter future is what I’d like you all to keep in mind for the next few minutes. A brighter future on many levels—personally, professionally, institutionally, and more—is a hope many of us have—a hope I am confident we can achieve. Because The University of Akron is a storied institution—a resilient, student-centered, bastion of our great community—it is my hope that you’ll oblige me as I cover some initial observations, highlight just a few of our numbers and narratives, and finally present to you a vision for an even greater UA of tomorrow.

As I mentioned, the concept of listening has characterized my first 112 days in the UA president role. Although I’ve listened to diverse stories, considered disparate opinions, and fielded a healthy mix of adulations and complaints, my mind keeps returning to our similarities rather than our differences. A unifying thread of my listening tour is the shared philosophy of deep care for this place. A rejection of apathy, the denial of mediocrity as a path forward, and the refusal to let negative perspectives define us have all repeated as shared values throughout the University. That fact, in and of itself, underscores the hopeful attitude of our people—even those in areas that are objectively struggling.

Organizationally, we remain mission-focused, student-centered, and highly community-engaged; those facts are evident in the underlying truth that we have a deeply caring, earnestly invested, and well-respected faculty and staff. Our mission states, in part, “The University of Akron...strives to develop enlightened members of society. It offers comprehensive programs of instruction...pursues a vigorous agenda of research in the arts, sciences, and professions; and provides service to the community. The University pursues excellence...and distinction...inquiry and creative activity.”

These values are ones that are shared by our people and guide us in making good on our promises to students. During the most recent strategic planning work groups, we identified three additional key areas of institutional focus. Those strategic goals of **flourishing people, lifelong learning, and social impact** allow us to uplift all individuals in all roles across all aspects of campus. They encourage us to maximize opportunities for learners at all levels and of all personality and professional types. They challenge us to integrate into the community and shine as a beacon of institutional and intellectual influence. Collectively, these strategic goals break us free from the confines of the traditional academy and facilitate an “all things for all people” approach. We have all of the tools in place to continue our multi-faceted endeavor for a better campus, a better culture, and a better community.

In December of 2021, when I initially interviewed at The University of Akron to become the College of Business dean, I shared my philosophy about UA and Greater Akron as my forever home. Today, that sentiment remains unchanged. In fact, I am better equipped to talk about and have a deeper understanding of this place. In multiple ways, this culmination of my career is a homecoming and reminds me of a dialogue that has continually run throughout my career. Having had the opportunity to travel internationally as part of various stages of my past professions, I naturally met many individuals from all over the world. Inevitably, conversations would lead to an exchange of information, always

including the question - “Where are you from?” When I would answer Akron, OH, sometimes I would receive a reply like, “Oh, I’m sorry.” Or a surprised, “Really? Akron, huh.” Boldly, I challenged those people. “Have you ever been there?” I would often retort. The number of people who admitted they had not was startling. Those times gave me the chance to shape opinion and change the rhetoric about our great city.

Now that I have the opportunity to lead The University of Akron, my passion for changing the narrative has deepened immensely. The passion I speak of is not simply for our great institution and its many moving parts. Instead, I’ve expanded, in an even greater personal sense, that passion to impact our fantastic city and the great state of Ohio as one of its representative institutions providing an outstanding education. Regional and statewide notoriety and our national and global recognition and reputation as a highly effective education are all aspects of this institution to celebrate.

All of these observations, additional pieces of the UA puzzle and the passions I share with so many—both internally and externally to the University—have led me to understand our story from a unique point of view. Now, more than ever, our storytelling must include our mission, our vision, and our values, and the underlying philosophy of how we weave those organizational identifiers into the stories of our people. Our history informs our present, and our present situation gives promise and hope to our future as a thriving university.

Second, I’d like to highlight just a few of our programs that place us on the cutting-edge of industry, information, and intellect. The numbers I will provide are evidence of our overall distinctiveness.

One. Number one in North America. That is the ranking we currently hold for polymer science and plastics engineering, according to edurank.com (“Ed-U rank dot com”). A few more key numbers for this distinct program...the early 1900s—at the time that Akron was known as the “Rubber Capital of the World,” our UA School of Polymer Science and Polymer Engineering was established. Now, part of the Polymer Industry Cluster, a collaboration of private and public partners, The University of Akron will receive 7.1 million dollars to continue our initiatives aimed at advancing sustainable polymer technologies. In conjunction with the Greater Akron Chamber, we are one of just 12 award recipients for the 51-million-dollar federal investment in EDA Tech Hubs for phase 2. We also anticipate strong consideration for the Ohio Innovation Hub Program, which we hope will bring to Northeast Ohio more than 30 million dollars in additional funding for the polymer industry.

In addition to the exciting promise that polymers bring to our campus and the region as a whole, we have also recently learned that The University of Akron will receive 16.9 million dollars from the fiscal year 2025-2026 state capital budget. That funding, earmarked to support some basic renovation and infrastructure needs across campus, will better equip us to serve the needs of the industries that rely on us for quality job candidates and facilities for partnership efforts.

Further, later this month, we will have the opportunity to host ribbon-cutting ceremonies for two campus facilities. We will formally open the renovated nurse anesthesia surgical lab, which was made possible by the 2023 Women in Philanthropy donors who raised \$100,000 for the project. This lab will allow our future nurses to better hone their technical skills. Also on the medical front, we have recently formed a partnership with Summa Health to establish a pathway for careers in radiologic technology. This is a two-year program from which students will emerge with an Applied Associate Degree in Health Services and be eligible to sit for the national registry exam to practice as a radiologic technologist. This partnership is poised to meet the critical need for qualified x-ray technicians and provide a point-of-entry

for additional imaging certifications like MRI and CT scanning. Teaming up with Summa to address workforce and health care needs for Northeast Ohio represents an additional way the University is affiliated with area industries that propel the region forward.

Later this month, on East Mill Street, we will open The Timken Foundation Center for Precision Manufacturing. This facility will benefit industry by improving manufacturing processes through research and will provide a learning environment specifically geared to preparing students for the manufacturing workforce.

As a partnership in a completely different industry, you may have heard that The University of Akron is the Official University of the Cleveland Browns. This multiyear strategic partnership, generously funded through private donations, will enhance our global recognition and brand identity while simultaneously opening avenues of unique opportunity to students, faculty, and staff across campus. Experiential learning opportunities exclusively for our students will prepare students for success in a leading professional sports arena and beyond.

Through highlighting just a few of the numbers and narratives of industry contributions, we can see the breadth of UA's offerings. Zip contributions to industry are many, and we thank the federal government and state of Ohio in considering us as a valuable contributor to the polymer industry and far beyond. Additionally, I'd like to thank our partners at Summa, Timken, and the Cleveland Browns organization for sharing our confidence in the quality of a UA education.

Two. That is the national rank of our University of Akron esports program, according to dailygame.net ("daily game dot net"). Just this year, Nate Meeker, UA's director of esports, was named director of the year by the National Association of Esports Coaches and Directors. Four is the number of times our students have brought back a national title in the Collegiate Rocket League game. Seven is the number of varsity esports teams we currently field. The University of Akron was one of the first 50 universities in the country to compete at the varsity level in esports. Additionally, we offer club and recreational gaming programs. Our competitive esports arena is housed in a more than twelve hundred square foot arena. Esports is just one of the many ways students are invested in out-of-class programming all over campus.

In fact, we currently have approximately 300 student organizations helping students find a niche, a sense of belonging, and the information and specialized insight that will transform their Akron experience. Seven centers and institutes in our nationally ranked and globally recognized College of Business give our students real-world experience with the added benefit of mentorship through dedicated advisory boards. The Cummings Center for the History of Psychology is a dynamic museum that helps us to better understand human behavior. And the Emily Davis Gallery in our Myers School of Art is just one of many art and performance venues where the public can witness the creativity and aptitude of our diverse student body.

On the athletics front, our University of Akron student-athletes continue to excel in the classroom and also in the sports arenas—they represent us well on the field, court, and pool of their respective sports. Speaking of the pool, we are so happy to report that UA Swimmer Grace Nuhfer ("NEW-fur") recently represented Team USA in the Paris Paralympics. I can happily report that Grace earned the silver medal in the 100-meter fly. Congratulations to Grace! Congratulations are also in order for the 19 UA men's soccer players who were named to the Big-East All-Academic Team. Throughout our athletics programs, students are excelling, and we appreciate the hard work and dedication required as they work toward the MAC championships in all sports.

Teams of many types represent the University in various forums each year.

1927. That is the earliest record we've found of University of Akron students participating in intercollegiate speech and debate. Widely accepted as the precursor to intercollegiate athletics, speech and debate is something we know UA has revered for more than a century. 93. That is the number of individual and team state championships our program has won just in the past two decades. Excelling in public address, limited preparation speaking, interpretation of literature, and International Public Debate, the University of Akron Speech and Debate Team, now housed in the College of Business, is part of our larger professional development and leadership center, open to students in all programs across campus. UA Speech and Debate has earned and fielded more than 1200 national qualifications just in the past two decades. With 13 national finalists and a reputation for quality and salient student messages, the team continues to make its mark in a nationwide forum.

Each of these programs—a mere sampling of all that we have to offer here at UA—demonstrates The University of Akron's ties to industry, commitment to disseminating information, and housing and spreading culture and sport. Faculty across campus are engaged in rigorous research programs that complement their in-class instruction, developing solutions and groundbreaking thought leadership in industry, human behavior, health, and more. Truly, our students and all UA colleagues share their intellect with the world. And, this current state of the university implies positive implications for our future.

Just yesterday morning, at an all-employee coffee event, I had the opportunity to share with the community the results of a recent survey, distributed just this past July. Some survey results worthy of mentioning include ideas for improved workplace culture, respect for our institutional history, and colleagues' aspirational words for the University five years from now. The survey indicates a deep, shared love for The University of Akron and a reverence for the high-quality, world-class education and accompanying programming that affords our students a 360-degree immersive experience. Innovative, vibrant, successful, strong, welcoming, competitive, connected...all these words and dozens more describe the realistic approach we're taking to revolutionizing our entire campus community. Incidentally, community is the single word appearing in the top 10 of all responses that colleagues used to describe the University of today *and* the University of tomorrow. That speaks volumes about our collective priorities, our common opinions, and our shared aspirations.

In previous correspondences, I have highlighted key areas of my future vision for The University of Akron. Today, I would like to introduce a threefold approach. I have stressed the importance of a renewed culture, and I believe a fresh, welcomed perspective will naturally stem from the three primary platforms of **growth, experience and identity**.

Necessary growth is embedded in our enrollment. Given the fact that our first day of classes was just last week, our census snapshot for this year is not yet available. Unfortunately, we will not be able to demonstrate growth in numbers this year, but the data we do have positions us with a positive trajectory for *future* growth. Our campus is built for more students than we currently have, and one of my primary goals is to grow the student body in strategic ways to best fill the seats in our classrooms. It's no secret that our primary goal is to produce students who will go on to lead meaningful lives and careers, so growing utility is of course at the forefront of this discussion. But the type of growth I'm referring to is also much broader than that. Yes, it is about filling our classrooms. But it is also about expanding the

careers of our colleagues. And it is about building out research and innovation capabilities. It's about advancing within our community, across the nation, and throughout the world.

Next, we offer extraordinary opportunities and unique experiences to our students. A hallmark of my previous career in business centered around hiring students from all sorts of degree programs and giving them a chance to work in industry as a tool for experiential learning. When I was dean of the College of Business, we adopted the motto **Experience Business** as a reminder that our students' education does not stop when they leave the confines of our classroom corridors and labs. Rather, I believe that a fulfilling education is one marked by hands-on experience and a set of values that includes multiple venues for learning. Something I often hear from students is that The University of Akron offers big-school opportunities with personalized education most often found at institutions much smaller than this one. Those positive experiences and personalized touches that masterfully blend opportunity with a true sense of belonging are not ones we can afford to sacrifice. Let's continue to uplift experience and opportunity as the x-factor that will make our students marketable and maintain for them a strong sense of meaning.

Finally, I've called for a consistent, transformative identity. *What is The University of Akron?* When I attended UA as a student, we had a catchphrase—wherever you want to go, you can get there from The University of Akron. I am living proof of that concept.

This entire speech—albeit a state of the university address—is a snapshot discussion of identity. It gives us a basis to talk about this incredible institution through the lens of a unified organizational narrative. The storytelling we engage in now—whether that involves internal stakeholders like our students and my UA colleagues—or external stakeholders with a bona fide interest in uplifting the city, region, and the state, and rightfully placing The University of Akron square in the middle of that—the storytelling we engage in now will define the next chapter for this celebrated university. I invite you all to participate in the process of generating buy-in. By attending today...by virtue of listening to a lengthy speech about one university, you have already demonstrated your willingness to become involved in our narrative. I invite us all to be part of the University of Akron's transformative identity. In the coming weeks, we will be formulating working groups to strategize forward movement in several key areas of the University. Please watch for more information as we deploy teams that will shape aspects of our identity for years to come.

The task of compartmentalizing all that makes The University of Akron great *is* daunting. Considering the state of the university also requires in-depth self-reflection for the institution as a whole. Thank you for being here today and for sharing our interest in seeing UA thrive. May the words "Go Zips!" be a rallying cheer throughout the coming year and always. I'm sure you all have questions, and I'm happy, at this time, to field those.