



---

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

---

## FALL ASSEMBLY | PRESIDENT'S REMARKS | AUGUST 18, 2021

Good morning, and welcome back to campus! It is truly wonderful to see you all again – in person, and not just in little boxes on our computer screens.

To our French speaking colleagues: *Bonjour! Soyez les bienvenus de retour sur le campus! C'est vraiment merveilleux de vous revoir en personne, et non plus séparé dans des cases sur nos écrans d'ordinateur.*

And greetings to our colleagues who speak Somali: *Subax wanaagsan, kuna soo dhawow xerada! Runtii waa wax cajiib ah inaan mar kale idin arko - qof ahaan, oo kuma aha sanduuqyo yaryar shaashadaha kombiyuutarkeena.*

And finally, for our colleagues in Tangier: *Masae alkhayr zumalaie fi Tanja. A`rifu anna al waqt muta akhir `indakoom wa tarawni `ala shashat al computer-- wa lakin ana sa`idoon jiddan li annakoom sa tarja`una ila al haram al jami`i li tudarissu wa takhdoomoo ma`a tullabina. Shukran jazeelan `ala `amalikum al moomtaz.*

And now back to English...As I make my way across our campuses over the last few weeks, I detect a palpable sense of joy in the air. A sense of cautious optimism. Of hope. Today marks the first time since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic that we have all gathered together in community, and I am truly grateful for the chance to be together.

As we gradually emerge from the global COVID-19 pandemic, as I begin the fifth year of my presidency at UNE, and as we now find ourselves around two-thirds the way through our five-year strategic plan, the time is auspicious to pause for a moment and reflect on our recent past and to look forward toward the future.

It's become almost cliché to say that the past academic year was “unprecedented.” But it really was. UNE has faced hardships before, including global conflicts and economic downturns, each of which presented their own unique challenges. But nothing in our lifetimes has compared to the disruption wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As I reflect on the past academic year, I couldn't be prouder of the way the UNE community came together to face this crisis. We acted boldly and decisively, supporting one another each step of the way. We worked hard. And we successfully navigated our way through it.

I won't repeat the details of our efforts and their fruits, as I've talked about those at various points over the past year-and-a-half. But I feel compelled to note a couple of points. First, relative to our peers, we did very well on any metric one might care to look at – student success, financial stability, and meeting obligations to our employees. Second, to paraphrase a traditional African proverb, it really does take a village, and I am deeply grateful to each of you for your tireless dedication to our mission. Our success is the product of our collective efforts. I'm especially grateful to those of you

who went well above and beyond the call of duty last year to serve in key roles – for example to assist with our viral testing and contact tracing efforts, to transport sick students and clean their rooms, or to welcome prospective students to our campus when few other colleges were doing so. You have my admiration and deep appreciation.

And finally, we didn't merely "keep the trains running"; we also made significant progress on many of our strategic initiatives. Just to note quickly a few highlights: we reorganized the structure of the College of Arts and Sciences. We developed the Guided Undergraduate Studies program (or "GUST" for short) to better serve new undergraduate students who are still deciding on an academic major; it is noteworthy that this program has quickly become very popular, being the fourth most popular undergraduate major among the incoming first-year class. With the support of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning and the Office of Information Technology Services, we stood up a new learning management system. We made great progress on developing a new, integrated undergraduate curriculum. We launched several new academic programs, and the College of Graduate and Professional Studies expanded their suite of health science pre-requisite course offerings. We developed a comprehensive zoning project for our Portland campus, and planned for the expansion of the College of Dental Medicine. We disseminated the results of our comprehensive campus climate survey and accelerated our efforts to promote diversity, inclusion, and belonging within our community. And we received the largest gift in UNE's history to support a bold project to build a new facility to house our prestigious College of Osteopathic Medicine and to support enhanced interprofessional clinical training programs on our Portland campus. Together, we've accomplished a great deal during a difficult time, and we have much to be proud of.

Now as we look forward to the coming year and beyond, the miracle of the COVID-19 vaccines will allow us to resume more-or-less normal operations on our campuses. We will, of course, remain vigilant, and will continue to monitor situation closely in case other measures are needed until the pandemic is finally fully resolved.

And speaking of the coming year, I am happy to share some good news with you: We will have no increase in out-of-pocket health insurance premiums next year, with no changes to benefits. This is especially noteworthy given that many employers continue to see year-over-year double-digit increases in health insurance premiums.

\*\*\*

Looking ahead beyond the pandemic, we in higher education find ourselves in what author Peter Vaill has termed a "permanent whitewater."<sup>1</sup> The age of ever-growing high school graduates looking to attend college and of widespread public confidence in higher education as the gateway to the American dream is over. Instead, we find ourselves facing an accelerating decline in the population of prospective students along with entrenched public skepticism about the value of higher education.

Against this challenging backdrop, UNE must grow in order to thrive. We must develop new programs, and we must expand existing ones where feasible. Our fixed costs – things like insurance and utilities, not to mention the cost of payroll and benefits – go up every year, more than can be covered by modest tuition increases alone. If we intend not merely to survive but to flourish in the service of our mission of preparing students to thrive in a rapidly changing world, we must not only acquire the resources to cover these perennially increasing fixed costs, but we must also have the resources to invest in new initiatives.

In order to grow, we must begin with an honest self-assessment. I offer the following overview of some of our key challenges and strengths.

---

<sup>1</sup> Vaill, Peter (1996). *Learning as a Way of Being: Strategies for Survival in a World of Permanent White Water*. JosseyBass.

**Our challenges** include:

- The demographic trends I mentioned above. A leading social scientist Nathan Grawe estimates that the Northeastern United States will have 20% to 25% fewer high school graduates attending college by the end of the decade.<sup>2</sup> Although the pool of potential college students in the Northeast has been decreasing for a half-dozen years already, we are on the precipice of a demographic cliff in 2025-26, when this trend will accelerate sharply, due to reduced child-bearing following the 2008 Great Recession. This reduction is most acute in New England, and in Maine in particular.
- In addition to these demographic challenges among first-time, full-time undergraduates, we will continue to see increasing competition for graduate and professional students — both on-campus and online. Indeed, we are already seeing these trends in most of our programs, including in our health profession programs.
- A relatively modest endowment, making us dependent on student tuition dollars
- The limited number and diversity of our academic programs
- Limited brand awareness outside of the region

**Our strengths**, which in some cases are the flip side of our challenges, include:

- A compelling mission and niche in the higher education marketplace
- A deep footprint in a few key areas, with strong regional brand awareness in professional healthcare programs in particular. We have correspondingly strong research programs in key areas. We have avoided spreading ourselves too thinly, and being tuition-dependent has encouraged us to remain aligned with workforce needs and student demand
- Very strong outcomes. Our students have high board pass rates, excellent post-graduation employment rates, and unusually low rates of default on student loans. Our return-on-investment supports a strong value proposition
- A strong sense of community
- Relatively nimble operations, supported by generally strong traditions of shared governance
- Beautiful, well maintained campuses
- A strong culture of sound financial management, leading to enviable fiscal stability

Given these strengths and weaknesses, what must we do to thrive?

First, **we must recognize our challenges clearly and frankly**. As I study colleges that have struggled and have even been forced to close over the past few years, a common pattern is the failure of the senior leadership, the faculty, and the professional staff to fully appreciate the depth of the institution's challenges until it was too late. In many cases, these institutions fooled themselves into complacency. We will not make that mistake.

In contemplating our challenges, we must distinguish those that are within our power to address from those we can't change. The latter are critical context for us to consider, but it's pointless to rail in futility against things that are beyond our control. For example, we can't change the fact we find ourselves in the part of the country with the most rapidly declining number of college-bound high school graduates. This is simply our reality. We therefore need to think creatively about how to attract and retain more students from both within New England and beyond.

---

<sup>2</sup> Grawe, N. D. (2018). *Demographics and the demand for higher education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Despite our recent successes in securing significant philanthropic support for the University, we cannot ensure a strong financial future by fundraising alone. Philanthropy makes a huge difference for strategic growth and for student scholarships, but there is simply no way that fundraising will replace tuition as the primary source of our revenue. I'm very proud of the extent to which we have grown our assets during my tenure at UNE thus far. For example, when I began my presidency, UNE's endowment was \$58 million, and through fundraising and investment earnings, today it stands at over \$80 million. Our cash reserves have likewise strengthened during this time, which was critical in allowing us to weather the pandemic without cutting wages or benefits. We have also managed our debt while adding important new facilities to our campuses. But there is no realistic way our endowment will grow fast enough to generate enough earnings to provide the bulk of resources we will need to thrive. For better or worse, UNE is, and will remain for the foreseeable future, primarily tuition-dependent. This underscores the importance of our student recruitment and retention efforts, which in turn depend on the quality of our academic programs and their alignment with workforce needs and student interests.

\*\*\*

Second, ***we must have a clear sense of our mission and of our unique niche in the higher education marketplace, and we must use that understanding as our North Star to guide everything we do.*** UNE is not, and has never been, a liberal arts college. New England has the highest concentration of liberal arts colleges in the country, including some highly selective, world-class ones right in our own backyard. These institutions serve important functions, but their missions are not the same as ours. Nor are we a vocational institution that focuses merely on job skills. And despite having truly world class research programs in select areas, we are not a Carnegie-1 research university, in which professors engage in research first and teaching second, if they teach at all. And importantly, we don't aspire to be any of these; that's not our mission nor our niche. Rather, we blend aspects of each of these three kinds of institutions into a unique, holistic, integrated focus. We enthusiastically embrace professional and preprofessional career preparation, integrated with critical habits of mind, cultural and global awareness and humility, and so-called "soft skills" like communication and teamwork. This unique education prepares students not only to be ready for a job or for post-graduate study upon graduation, but it provides them the skills and intellectual orientation to reinvent themselves continuously over the course of their lifetime, to adapt readily to changing demands in their workplaces and to explore career avenues that may not emerge for another decade or two.

In addition, we measure ourselves not by the number of applicants to our programs we can reject in order to appear highly selective, but rather by the number of lives we can change. We embrace diversity in all its forms. Many of our students are the first in their families to attend college. Many come from modest economic backgrounds. Indeed, the percentage of our students who are Pell Grant recipients is much higher than that of the highly-endowed elite liberal arts colleges in our neighborhood, each of which claims to prioritize providing access to students from economically challenged backgrounds. And despite the economic challenges of many of our students, our student loan default rates are very low: 2.4%, compared to the state and national averages of around 11%. This means that our students are both getting good jobs that enable them to pay back their student loans, and taking this responsibility seriously as contributing members of society.

Our students are also academically diverse. While we certainly attract many top-tier students, our bread-and-butter is not the high school valedictorian, but the hardworking B+ student. We embrace these mid-tier students, we challenge them, and we provide abundant academic support to help them succeed. We provide them to tools they need to thoroughly transform their lives.

Our mission is noble. We change lives. What we do here is needed today more than ever. To thrive, we must fully and enthusiastically embrace who we are and what we do rather than trying to be something else. We have so much to be proud of, and we must continuously seek to become a better version of UNE.

\*\*\*

The third thing we must do to thrive, in addition to accurately assessing our challenges and embracing our mission, is to **understand and fully leverage our competitive advantages**. I won't repeat each of the strengths I mentioned earlier, but allow me to elaborate on a few that especially deserve our collective attention.

**We must be agile**, acting more quickly than our peers in sizing up new opportunities and then courageously and creatively acting on them in a timely way. It's been said that colleges tend to move at the pace of a speeding glacier. But to take advantage of opportunities presented by a rapidly changing world, we must be nimble. We cannot allow unnecessary bureaucratic barriers, poor communication, parochial self-interest, or distrust to slow us down. We cannot succumb to analysis paralysis. Our students deserve better.

We must embrace a model of shared governance that is deliberative and thoughtful but also efficient. In my career I've served in many roles within the academy, including as president of the Faculty Senate, as department head, dean, provost, and now president. No matter which side of the table I found myself, I've never accepted the idea that a university's faculty and administrative leadership must inevitably be at odds. As the pandemic has underscored, we literally breathe the same air. Our fundamental interests are the same. The faculty, professional staff, and senior leadership will sometimes disagree, just as individuals within each of these groups will sometimes disagree. Such differences of opinion and perspective are healthy and need not be avoided. But we must work through disagreements productively, quickly, and always with a default assumption of charity and good will. We must continuously resist divisiveness to work together in support of our mission.

**We must continuously innovate**. We must not be afraid to take calculated risks, knowing that sometimes we will fail. We must learn from those failures rather than allowing them to derail, demoralize, or paralyze us. For example, we must regularly develop new academic programs that are aligned with student demand and workforce needs and are feasible given our human and capital infrastructure, while right-sizing or winding down programs that have experienced reduced demand. While avoiding chasing shiny new objects and fetishizing novelty in and of itself, we must always be open to new ways of doing things. Whether you are a member of the faculty, the accounting department, the grounds crew, the University Council, or one of the many other critical groups that make up the UNE family, there are innovations in your work that await discovery. I encourage you to approach your activities with fresh eyes and to stay vigilant to better ways of doing things in the service of our shared mission.

And keep in mind that innovation doesn't mean merely throwing money at problems. In fact, research has shown that this alone rarely works. At UNE we pride ourselves on our resourcefulness. We do a lot with a little in the service of our mission. We bring the New England spirit of ingenuity and pragmatism to bear on our challenges. New dollars are sometimes necessary to innovation and we must be ready to make those investments when needed. But innovation doesn't always require new resources and in fact it often frees up resources that can then be reinvested to meet other needs.

**One important form of innovation is ensuring that our academic programs are distinctive**. In the hyper-competitive higher education environment, it's not enough merely to have high quality academic programs. To stand out from the competition, our programs, and indeed our overall student experience, must be distinctive. The last thing the world needs is another generic MBA program to join the more than 1100 such programs already in existence in the US alone. You might recall that during my first Fall Assembly address in 2017, I challenged each academic unit to clarify its vision for becoming more

distinctive. Many programs took this task seriously and are making good progress in realizing their vision. But we have more work to do to ensure that each of our programs is differentiated from the pack, and in this way contributes to a clear identity and greater visibility for UNE as a whole.

It's important to remember that distinctiveness doesn't always have to mean complete novelty. **Often the best path to distinctiveness is identifying best practices from elsewhere, and then modifying and integrating them into a uniquely UNE package.** Consider as one example the collaborative approach known as interprofessional education (or IPE for short) in our healthcare programs. We're certainly not the only place doing IPE, but our approach is still sufficiently ahead of the mainstream to be distinctive. Moreover, as we move our College of Osteopathic Medicine to Portland to create a full-spectrum health sciences campus there, we will redouble our efforts in IPE, and we will marry these with deep training in telehealth and digital medicine, with a particular focus on underserved populations. This unique and distinctive combination, made possible by the creation of a health sciences campus that will be literally unprecedented in New England with respect to the concentration of programs on a single footprint, will allow our health profession programs to stand out even more than they already do. As another example, our marine programs have developed a core curriculum and specialty majors – including in science, business and entrepreneurship, policy, aquaculture, aquarium sciences, and any combination of these. Our marine programs capitalize on the oceanfront location of our Biddeford campus to provide unparalleled opportunities for marine fieldwork and research. We are developing plans to address infrastructure needs of the Girard Marine Sciences Center to enhance such experiential learning, thereby making our marine programs even more of a destination for students from across the country. And the work taking place in our Makerspace and innovation hub to promote design thinking across our academic programs is yet another opportunity to enhance the quality and distinctiveness of our programs.

As these examples illustrate, **we must continuously seek to enhance the student experience – both inside and outside the classroom.** Students don't draw bright lines between so-called "academic" experiences and co-curricular ones. Moreover, as emphasized in our Strategic Plan, learning is best when these experiences seamlessly compliment and support one another. Internship and other experiential learning opportunities reinforce and supplement knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom. Our Student Affairs team provides wonderful experiences for our students, both graduate and undergraduate, to develop their leadership skills and workplace readiness. Our professionals in the College of Graduate and Professional Studies are committed to guiding and supporting our adult learners through every step of their studies. And we know, based on the responses in our climate study, that our students look up to our faculty as role models. Although we have reason to be proud of all of these efforts, we cannot rest on our laurels. We must always seek ways of enhancing these experiences so that the holistic UNE experience becomes truly unparalleled.

**We must be data-driven.** While acknowledging and respecting tradition, we cannot be bound by it when the evidence points in different directions. Further, we cannot rely on mere instincts, intuitions, and anecdotes in lieu of data to guide our decision making.

By embracing our mission, remaining agile and data-driven in all we do, continuously innovating, building and sustaining distinctive, high-quality academic programs, and enhancing the student experience, we will ensure that UNE thrives, including – but not limited to – improving our undergraduate retention and graduation rates. As I've said before, the best student to recruit is the one who is already here. We owe it to all of our students to provide them the very best possible opportunity to be successful.

As our region's demographics continue to evolve, a growing percentage of those seeking higher education will be working adults. This includes not only those seeking traditional degrees, but also adults pursuing certificates, continuing education, and other non-credit bearing opportunities. This provides many new opportunities to extend our reach. But we're not the only ones who are tracking these trends; the



online space grows more competitive by the day. For example, when we launched our online masters of social work program in 2009, it was the first such program in the country. But at last count there are now 84 such accredited programs in existence. The opportunities for growth in the online space will belong to those institutions that can creatively exploit specific niches by developing and articulating clear value propositions. I look forward to working with our new dean of CGPS, the provost, and the faculty and professional staff from across the University to move these efforts forward. Again, the principles of evidence-based innovation around quality, distinctiveness, interdisciplinarity, and student centrality in the context of a realistic self-appraisal and an appreciation of our mission will serve as our guides.

As we address each of these areas, ***we must embed and embrace diversity and inclusion, in all their forms, in everything we do.*** For anyone that may not have faced this reality in the past, the events of the past year have cast into stark relief the problems our nation still faces in realizing our vision of a society in which all people are afforded equal opportunities to thrive. I have been struck over and over again by the deep commitment of our Nor'easter community to the values of diversity and justice. Although I am very proud of the progress we have made, we are imperfect. We have more to learn about our history and its ongoing legacies, and we have much work to do to create a society free of bigotry and discrimination of all kinds.

As we strive to become an even more inclusive and welcoming community in which no one doubts their place at the table, ***let us not neglect one of the most critical forms of diversity for a university community: the diversity of ideas.*** The fundamental purpose of the academy is the robust exchange of ideas, and the marketplace of ideas can only function when diversity of thought is on offer and when robust discourse is welcomed, even if it challenges long held beliefs and makes us feel uncomfortable. I have grown increasingly concerned with the promulgation, from groups across the political spectrum, of rigid ideological orthodoxies detached from data and reason. We've seen far too many examples of people attacking others with whom they disagree rather than engaging them in thoughtful discourse.

Let me be clear that viewpoint diversity does not mean that anything goes. It should not be a cover for artificial "balance" or false equivalencies. Diversity of ideas must always support the pursuit of truth, not mask it. Some ideas simply don't merit our serious attention. I encourage all Nor'easters to embrace the opportunity to engage in honest, respectful dialogue with others, especially those who have different perspectives than one's own. I am delighted that our University Libraries will soon be launching a website devoted to viewpoint diversity, and I commend it to you. Let us prioritize evidence and reason as our tools. Let us model for our students how to discuss important topics constructively.

\*\*\*

As I hope I've made clear, despite the stiff headwinds we face, UNE has the opportunity for a very bright future. It's now up to us to seize the moment and work together to realize our potential.

Let me conclude by saying again how privileged I am, and I believe we all are, to be part of this amazing community. The University of New England has a proud history, an amazing present, and a bright future. Let us all commit ourselves to realizing an even better version of our unique institution.

My best wishes for the new academic year. Together, let's make it the best one ever.

Thank you.