State of the University

President William N. LaForge

August 15, 2014

Delta State University

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BUILDING QUALITY AND EXCELLENCE: A WORK IN PROGRESS

State of the University Address
Opening Convocation: Academic Year 2014-15

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Building Quality and Excellence: A Work in Progress

Welcome to the start of the 2014-15 academic year and the beginning of Delta State's 89th year. Long-ago president of the University of California, Clark Kerr, said, "I find that our three major administrative problems on a campus are sex for the students, athletics for the alumni, and parking for the faculty." After my first year in office, I surely wish it were that simple. There have been some great moments and some that are more sublime. In one of the orientation sessions for new students last month, our orientation leaders asked new students some questions about Delta State as an "ice breaker" exercise as the day started. One of the questions was, "Who is the president of Delta State?" One young lady shouted out, "Henry Outlaw!"

I have chosen as a title for this year's convocation address, "Building Quality and Excellence: A Work in Progress," a play on last year's title because that quest continues.

Charles Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities opens with this unforgettable line: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way--in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only."

The last year for Delta State certainly does not stack up to that prosaic description, but there is some symmetry in the comparison. It was neither the best nor the worst of times. I hope we have gained, employed, and imparted wisdom. Amid the change and newness, I think that there is belief and the spring of hope. And I certainly hope that we are all directed to Heaven and not in the other direction.

Before I report to you on the state of the university, I wish to welcome some special community guests. Delta State's primary mission remains classroom instruction – educating our students and shepherding them through their academic rigors to graduation.

But we also pride ourselves on our longstanding and strong relationship with the community – our hometown of Cleveland and the towns across the Delta. Last month, I hosted a meeting of local mayors to discuss the special partnership Delta State enjoys with our surrounding communities. I am pleased to welcome a number of the mayors and other local government leaders to our opening convocation today. With us also are a number of Delta State's biggest supporters from Cleveland and outlying areas – Delta State alumni, "green and white" local businessmen and women, and outstanding volunteers. Thank you for all you do for Delta State.

Colleagues and friends, the overall state of the university is very good and solid. After more than a year in office, I am now able to share perspectives I was unable to convey to you a year ago. It has been an incredible year of learning and "baptism by fire" for me as I have dealt with many issues near and dear to our very existence. We still have challenges and much work to do; but, we are making good progress, and we are pursuing many opportunities. We have planted so many seeds for the future that if only half of them come up, we will be in good shape -- seeds of new and creative programming, ramped-up recruiting, smart budgeting, and renewed emphasis on the success of our students and academic programs.

Our overarching dual challenges continue – stabilizing our enrollment and budget. They are our priorities, and their successful outcomes will trigger all other potentially good things to come.

This morning, I will focus on five key points: enrollment, budget, compensation, capital improvements, and a vision for growth and excellence.

First, our enrollment scenario: I have some terrific news for you. I am pleased to report to you that we expect to see an increase in undergraduate enrollment this fall for the first time in eight years. Those many years of decline took us from 4217 students in the fall of 2006 to 3526 students this past fall. That decline is over. We won't know the true numbers for a couple of weeks, but we are projecting a four to five percent increase in undergraduate enrollment, meaning approximately 150 students, over last fall's enrollment.

What a difference one year can make. At last year's convocation, I assured you that we would win the battle of recruitment and retention. Our mission has been to stem the tide of enrollment erosion, and it appears that we are accomplishing that – and more. That train has been stopped and reversed. We expect more freshmen and transfer students on campus this fall, and we are opening up additional residence hall rooms in Cain-Tatum to accommodate them.

It has taken all of us to accomplish this feat, especially in an extremely tight marketplace for new students, and we must continue our efforts to ensure success going forward. I commend our recruiting staff and all of you -- faculty and staff -- for your vital contribution to this effort this past year, and I ask for your stepped-up assistance again this year. Under Dean Debbie Heslep's guidance, we successfully employed new recruiting strategies and a lot of hard work that have made a positive difference in bringing more students through our doors. Dr. Heslep, will you and your staff please stand and accept our gratitude for a job well done?

Similarly, with new retention efforts in place under Provost Charles McAdams' direction, we are focusing increased attention on academic advising and data analysis, an early alert system, and an improved first year experience and seminar – efforts that are underway to help us keep students in school and on track to graduation. The Student Success Task Force is at work on retention policies and strategies that will help ensure that our students find their rightful place and path at Delta State. We are also focused on using scholarships for recruitment more wisely, and we have in operation, for the first time in our history, a major student retention scholarship program established to honor President Emeritus and Mrs. Kent Wyatt.

But we can't stop there, and we won't. This year, we must redouble our recruitment and retention efforts to boost our numbers even further. I call on our recruiters, faculty, staff, and alumni – all of us together – to continue the battle to increase our enrollment, keep students in school, and graduate them on time. We have a great product to sell at Delta State – a special message to share – and a terrific experience for students who come here. As I visited more than 40 high schools to recruit this past year, I could see that our message was resonating with students, and I look forward to being on the road again this

coming year. Once and for all, let's break the long-held tradition of Delta State being considered a *hidden* treasure in the Delta. We *are* a treasure, but we are alive and well and open for business. Let's get the word out.

To do just that, Caitlyn Thompson and her staff in Communications and Marketing are stepping up marketing and advertising efforts that clearly underpin our recruitment strategies, especially in population centers such as Memphis and Desoto County, the Jackson metro area, and the Coast. Our Alumni Office, under the management of Jeffrey Farris, has taken the lead in establishing the Legacy Program that puts in place a system of communication and recruitment with the children of our alumni.

This fall, under the direction of Career Services Director Davlon Miller, we will have OkraWorks jobs available for our students in and around Cleveland – our signature off-campus work-study program that puts extra dollars in the pockets of students to help them bridge the financial gap to enroll and stay in school and to gain valuable work experience.

We are on the right road to successful student recruitment and retention, and it's time to push even harder. Our efforts are paying off. We are winning the enrollment battle, but we can't let up.

Second, some tough-love budget news you may not wish to hear, but you must: Our financial and budget situation is our most serious challenge because of a weak (but improving) cash position, excessive student accounts receivables, extensive deferred maintenance of campus buildings, unproductive (but greatly improving) spending patterns across campus, and less-than-adequate revenue primarily caused by years of enrollment erosion. We are doing everything possible to address each of these areas of concern, many of which have manifested themselves clearly only in the last several months, but have been endemic in our culture for years. We are continuing to work hard to stabilize our financial position, one that we inherited and that, frankly, was not particularly strong. For the ensuing year, we will operate under an adequate but limited budget. Most campus departmental and program budgets will experience marginal reductions. Bringing our financial picture back to a healthy condition is a top priority along with enrollment. The

realistic and conservative budget in place for this year, although tight, will allow us to continue our essential enterprises.

On the revenue side of the ledger, the state legislature and the university system funding formula were pretty good to us for this new fiscal year. We realized a slight increase in state funding that was badly needed. Our overall budget, including state support, tuition and other revenue, is $45.5 million. Under the aegis of a budget that reflects our priorities, we will direct modest additional dollars to student recruitment and scholarships, and to student success services and retention. That is the path to budget and enrollment stabilization.

Tuition remains $6012 per year for this year. While we could certainly use the additional revenue that increased tuition would produce, I fear any increase at this point would negatively affect recruitment and retention, and I don't want to price ourselves out of business. But be clear about this: Delta State remains a superb value when it comes to a college education. We are marketing ourselves on the combination of quality instruction and programs at the best price around. And we will consider a tuition increase going forward to give us a boost on the revenue side of the ledger – as long as it's not counterproductive to our recruitment and retention efforts.

Thanks to many of you, we have realized savings on the expense side of the ledger this past year, and we need to continue that effort this fiscal year. This spending reduction exercise was essential to help stabilize our financial situation, especially our cash position, and it will pay dividends going forward. Consider those reductions to be a wise investment in our future, collectively and individually.

But, unfortunately, those efforts simply weren't enough. The tough news is that, despite the belt-tightening this past year and a tiny increase in state support, that combination is not enough for us to return to sound financial health. So we will take a close look at all expenses on campus to assess what courses, programs, and services are unproductive, unaffordable, or simply no longer fit into the scope of what we should be doing as a university to serve our students. We can't be all things to all people. We must refocus on our core missions and support them with our budget. The Cabinet is addressing

our budget situation head-on, and it is our priority. CFO McClellan will present a more detailed account of our financial situation in two afternoon sessions for faculty and staff next Tuesday in the Baioni Conference Center. You will receive an email with details this afternoon. The provost and CFO have begun meetings with the Deans, and they will be meeting as well with the Faculty Senate, Academic Council, the Administrative Staff Council, and with other campus stakeholders over the next few weeks. We will work with everyone on campus to help achieve permanent savings exceeding a million dollars on the expense of the ledger during this academic year. Decisions about the sources of potential savings have not been made yet, but will be forthcoming during the fall semester; and, faculty and staff will have input in these decisions through their supervisors and representatives on the Cabinet.

So we continue to be about the business of managing scarce resources and reducing expenses, while aggressively advocating for public and private dollars to enhance our revenue stream in every way possible. For too long, Delta State's expenses have continued to rise while enrollment has decreased. Both those trains have to stop, and we are committed to halting both and turning them in the right direction. We are now on our way to accomplishing those goals, but it will take more time, effort, and patience. I will keep you informed of our progress through campus updates and forums. Our financial picture *will* improve, and, just as we are winning the enrollment battle, we will win the battle of the budget. I am committed to that.

Third, a few comments on compensation goals: The sooner we come to grips with, and solve, our financial woes, the better off the university will be and the better off each of you will be. Nothing fuels my sense of urgency about stabilizing our budget and enrollment more than the need to give pay raises. We have analyzed the compensation situation on campus for faculty and staff alike, and we know and understand the need for salary increases. We hear the voices of your faculty and administrative staff representatives who serve on the Cabinet. It's high time we do something about it. In my mind, it's a matter of when, not if.

I have spoken before about the concept of "all boats rising" when we increase enrollment and stabilize our budget. As I have described, we are well on the way to

achieving those short-term goals. If all goes well, we will implement a plan to provide increases in compensation within the next year. I want nothing more than to reward our faculty and staff with long-overdue raises for the great work you do.

Here's the plan. First, having the dollars to support salary increases is dependent on the following: improving our cash position by a million dollars this year, plus either an increased appropriation from the state of the same amount or an equivalent tuition increase. Second, we will begin as soon as possible to implement incremental salary increases for our minimum wage earners, and then increase salaries of faculty and staff who fall below the regional minimum salary levels. From there, we hope to provide merit/market increases to the entire campus with the idea being that "all boats will rise." Our goal is to begin implementing these steps no later than the beginning of the next fiscal year – next July 1. I am pleased to report that we actually began the process this summer with a small increase for those staff making under $20,000. Addressing the needs of our minimum wage earners first is a priority supported by the Faculty Senate, and we thank you for staking out that position.

Why next summer to award the increases? Because we need this year to restore order and stability to our financial house, as I described earlier. I am sensitive to the fact that you previously have heard compensation increase plans and aspirations that never came about. I want you to know we are quite serious about this plan. No sudden promises and no false expectations. Work with us, be patient, and we will make it happen. The combination of expense management, successful recruitment and retention, and additional revenue leads to raises. That's the winning formula.

Fourth, capital improvements on campus: This year and next, you will see a major push forward in campus infrastructure improvements funded by 14.5 million state-provided bond dollars – for completion of fire-suppression improvements in our residence halls; the long-overdue completion of the Caylor-White-Walters science and math complex; a repaving of our streets; and, renovation of the dining hall and Zeigel music building. As they say when they put out the orange cones, "Pardon our dust -- progress is underway." We are also undertaking other improvements such as roof renovations and preparation for structural repairs in the coliseum, and you may have noticed that the old Cafeteria

Apartments are gone, with a nice green space in their place. I extend a special shout-out for the great job all our Facility Management colleagues do to keep our campus beautiful and for all their efforts to keep our buildings maintained, clean, and welcoming, and our systems operational.

Fifth and finally, some perspectives on a vision for excellence and growth: We are coming off a good year for numerous reasons, with a bright future ahead in many areas of endeavor. We concluded four successful searches for key positions -- Athletic Director, Vice President for Administration and Finance and Chief Financial Officer, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, and, our newest addition, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Dr. Dave Breaux.

Our leadership team is now in place. To a person, I appreciate what they do every day because they are making things happen on campus as we pursue our shared mission and vision. I am pleased to introduce you to members of the 2014-15 Cabinet:

- Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost – Dr. Charles McAdams
- Vice President for Finance and Administration – Mr. Steve McClellan
- Vice President for Student Affairs – Dr. Wayne Blansett
- Vice President for University Relations – Dr. Michelle Roberts
- Associate Vice President for Finance & Administration – Dr. Myrtis Tabb
- Dean of Enrollment Management – Dr. Debbie Heslep
- Director of Athletics – Mr. Ronnie Mayers
- Executive Director of Alumni-Foundation – Mr. Keith Fulcher
- Academic Council Representative – Mr. Jeff Slagell
- Faculty Senate President – Dr. David Hebert
- Administrative Staff Council Chair – Ms. Marilyn Read
- Student Government President – Mr. Mikel Sykes

This year we completed the majority of work on the decennial SACS self-study that leads to reaffirmation of the university's accreditation. We submitted all the required documents and hosted an on-site team this past spring, all through the collaborative efforts of all units on campus. Our final response to SACS is due on September 10, and we will

receive the news of our Reaffirmation in December. We are very pleased with the accolades we received from the On-Site team, which included a letter of appreciation for our hospitality and support. I say a special thanks to all of you for contributing to this extensive enterprise over the last couple of years, and especially to Dean Beverly Moon and her team for their leadership and hard work on this hefty undertaking.

Due largely to the efforts of Keith Fulcher, Executive Director of Alumni-Foundation, and the Foundation board, Delta State received its largest financial gift in history -- $3.1 million from the estate of Robert Smith, whose name graces the School of Nursing. Those dollars will support the growth and operations of the nursing program, and allow us to expand to serve the profession and the Delta. This gift is truly transformative for our nursing program.

We have also recently concluded the successful $40 million fundraising Campaign for Delta State, and actually exceeded the target with a total of $43.3 million raised. With the Foundation's leadership, we are embarking on a number of mini-campaigns to raise funds for marketing and advertising, student retention scholarships, support for the band, and general scholarships to strengthen our recruiting efforts. Fundraising from private donors and foundations is a priority for us and an important source of additional revenue, and we are stepping up our strategies this year through our own foundation and also through the guidance of a new task force charged with approaching major national foundations.

An important ingredient of our collective vision must include a continuing strong commitment to diversity. This past spring, we hosted the inaugural race relations conference, "Winning the Race." It was a grand success, and we are already in the planning stages for next year's event. When resources allow, we will hire a university diversity officer. Currently we are rebuilding the Diversity Committee, and I encourage any of you who are interested in serving to let me know. I am pleased to announce that Arlene Sanders is the new chair of the Diversity Committee.

Early this summer, as a result of the good work and nomination by our outgoing Diversity Committee Chair, Georgene Clark, I was proud to accept for Delta State the 2014

Civil Rights and Social Justice Award from the National Civil Rights Conference. At this time, I ask the Co-Chairs of the Conference – Professors Georgene Clark, Garry Jennings, and Paulette Meikle - to come forward to accept the award medal for the University and for all those involved with the successful conference, with our Quality Enhancement Plan, and with our Diversity Committee.

Campus diversity will also get a boost from our international student program initiatives. We have expanded our recruitment efforts, and set in motion student and faculty exchange programs with universities in Poland, Bulgaria, and Russia. We hosted professors from the latter two countries this past year, and I signed additional exchange documents with our Polish university partner in May while I was there to teach. We expect the first wave of exchange students from Russia on campus this fall for our Blues Conference and next spring from Poland, and we will give our students the opportunity to study abroad in both locations next spring as well. Student Success Center Executive Director Christy Riddle heads up our international student program, and I say thanks to you, Christy, and your staff for your good work.

In an effort to tear down the old "across-the-highway 8-division" syndrome, I have enjoyed the opportunity to meet with faculty this past year in the Union on the set-aside first Fridays of the month, and I will continue hosting those meetings this year. I will also continue my Fireside Chats, intended to showcase DSU and spread the word about the university and its various events and activities, and posted every Monday on the Delta State website. If you're into Twitter, follow me @presidentDSU. During the coming year, I will again conduct forums with students, faculty, and staff, and I will continue to visit student organizations and residence halls regularly. I will also teach a leadership seminar this fall.

I renew our commitment to improved communications, collaboration, and transparency on campus as we strive to be inclusive of all our constituencies. I am so proud of our new Dedicated Statesmen Association, an idea that originated with Dr. James Robinson for a group composed of retired faculty and staff who volunteer in so many ways to help Delta State.

I want to make a special point about collegiality. I will continue to do everything possible to encourage collaboration and collegiality on campus as we all work together to make this university a welcoming and hospitable place to teach and learn for everyone. I hope each of you will join me in that effort. The Academic Council recently approved a thorough list of expectations of faculty that includes, "Maintaining a collegial environment in which collaboration on scholarly, instructional, and University issues is respectful, critical, and supportive."

This year we had an unfortunate situation that called collegiality into question. That issue has been adjudicated through our grievance process that is employed only on rare occasions. Let me be clear. There is no room or time for incivility on this campus. It will not stand. We have too much serious business at hand, too many important priorities, and far too many good, positive, and exciting things happening and planned to have to deal with negativity and anyone's inability to "play well in the sandbox."

Delta State is long known for its hospitality and welcoming spirit, and we need to continue flying that banner high. In everything we do, we should roll out the "green carpet" to students, faculty and staff, alumni, community members, and visitors alike, regardless of their background. As an increasingly multicultural and international campus, we must continue leading the Delta and the State in demonstrating to everyone that our doors at Delta State are open and that we are friendly to all. And, while the subject may be a little uncomfortable for some, that openness and receptivity must apply to our friends and colleagues in the LGBT community as well. At Delta State, more than ever, we are one. In matters of diversity and social acceptance, we get it. We get along.

You have heard me say before that I believe Delta State is the rightful academic center of the blues. Well, that vision is on track toward realization. I am pleased to announce that Delta State will host the inaugural international academic blues conference on October 6 and 7, with scholars and blues enthusiasts from around the country and the world coming to our campus. Dr. Shelley Collins and Don Allan Mitchell from our faculty are co-chairing the event.

To underpin our vision as the academic center of the blues, we have just received a three-year $598,000 grant from the Robert Hearin Foundation to support the International Delta Blues Project, comprising our blues conference, the development of an interdisciplinary blues studies curriculum, and the establishment of a blues leadership incubator. The larger vision is this: In the years ahead, when someone from anywhere in the world wants to study the blues, Delta State University will be *the* place to go. Partnering with GRAMMY Museum Mississippi as it opens next year, along with our own Delta Music Institute activities, Delta State will be a blues mecca for scholars, musicians, industry gurus, historians, demographers, and tourists. And where better for the International Delta Blues Project to be headquartered than our own Delta Center for Culture and Learning, with its new director, Dr. Rolando Herts, who will join us next week.

On the heels of a successful series of University Colloquia speakers this past year, we will continue the Distinguished Lecture Series with another cast of all-star visitors to campus this year. I am pleased to announce that the Honorable Charles Bowsher, former Comptroller General of the United States, will be the inaugural lecturer for the 2014-15 series that kicks off on September 25th.

With the 2013-14 athletic season now in the books as one of Delta State's most successful years overall, this coming year holds just as much promise. Many of our teams enjoyed post-season play. We continue to be the winningest athletic program in the state. Check out the new sports turf that has replaced our aging natural turf cover at the football stadium, and look for major renovations at Ferriss Field later in the year – both projects totally funded by private donor contributions. Let there be no doubt that we *are* a university of champions, in the classroom and on the field, court, and course.

At the heart of what makes Delta State special are our people. I have mentioned many of them in my remarks this morning, and there are many more individuals who do so much every day to make Delta State so unique. Some are legends in life and beyond, and we are fortunate to be surrounded by so much incredible talent.

One such talent was legendary women's basketball coach Margaret Wade whose statue in front of the Coliseum will be dedicated during Homecoming week this fall.

Another is Lucy Harris-Stewart, our all-American center on Coach Wade's three national championship teams, to whom we presented an honorary degree at spring commencement. Recently, legendary baseball Coach Boo Ferriss and basketball all-American Crystal Hardy were inducted into the inaugural class of the Gulf South Conference Hall of Fame. Just last month, we honored DSU Registrar Emeritus James Donald Cooper by naming the Registrar's Office for him. This fall, we will pay tribute to basketball Coach Lloyd Clark, who led the Lady Statesmen to three national championships, when we name the Coliseum court for him. And what a special year this is for President Emeritus Kent Wyatt, who turned 80 years old in May, and is celebrating his 50th year of service to Delta State this year. On Homecoming day, when, by the way, we will be renewing our rivalry with Mississippi College, we will celebrate these milestones with a special luncheon in Dr. Wyatt's honor.

So here we are on the brink of another academic year, with spirits high and every opportunity to fulfill our mission of providing superb classroom instruction and supporting our students in every way possible. Our challenge to be the best at what we do is ever-present, and never has it been so important as now when our students need every bit of knowledge and inspiration we can provide as they go out into the world and compete in the marketplace. Our goal is to foster quality instruction and high academic standards. This fall, we will have an opportunity to continue our discussion about the general education curriculum, and decide the best course of action for this university and our students. We will do so with the goal of preserving rigorous academic standards that make sense and work for our ultimate products – our students – while respecting the decision of the academy.

During the summer orientation programs for incoming freshmen and transfer students, I saw excitement on their faces. I heard enthusiasm in their comments about coming to Delta State. As a parent myself, I felt what those new students' parents were feeling as they handed their sons and daughters off to us with a blend of trust, hope, and uncertainty. We are rolling out the "green carpet" like never before, and the Delta State team is working together, better than ever, to move us ahead to greater heights. The vision of a larger and enthusiastic student population is gaining traction. We now have in our

charge the next generation of college students to teach, to guide, and to inspire. Let's do it well!

The vision for our future also includes pursuing every opportunity and avenue toward excellence, expecting the best from each other and holding each other accountable, and working diligently to make this university one of high standards, satisfied students, successful graduates, engaged faculty and staff, and proud alumni. That vision includes Delta State's rightful place as a bastion of education and a beacon of hope in the Mississippi Delta and a shining example of excellence for the State and Nation.

As I navigate my second year as president, I reiterate the commitment I made to you at my inauguration last fall to build and maintain a high standard of excellence. With that commitment comes the responsibility to lead this university through some redirection and changes, some of which may not be popular in certain quarters. I make no apologies for that. I want you to know I am resolute about that leadership role as we make decisions that are well-advised, thoughtful, fair, and in the best in interest of this University.

I ask our superb faculty once again to double-down on your commitment to excellence in the classroom and to guiding our students to graduation. I challenge our great administrative staff colleagues to embrace this university like never before, and make customer service for our students a priority, no matter what your job might be. I ask you all for a renewed commitment to recruitment and retention of students. Each of you is a key player in our mission to help this university achieve excellence, and I look forward to joining with you to make that goal come true.

Reflecting on my first sixteen months in office, to the day in fact, I will close, as I opened, with a quote from A Tale of Two Cities, this one from part of the last line of the book: "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done..." That sums up my commitment to Delta State and to our vision of excellence.

I am honored to serve you and this University as President, and I pledge to you my best efforts as we continue our journey toward excellence. We know what to do. Now it's time for action. Together we can do it. It is a new day, and this is *our* Delta State. Let's go forth and have a terrific year!