

WELCOME and WHY

Thank you, Sabrina. We are so fortunate to have you as a student government President. Welcome, University of Central Florida students, faculty, staff, and friends.

I am excited to talk to you today to share a vision for UCF that can be simply stated: We will become the world's leading public metropolitan research university, a top 50 public research university, determined to foster success for students of all backgrounds and to producing research and creative works that positively impacts lives in Central Florida and beyond.

It is a challenge worthy of our skills and passion. Together, we will move towards greater excellence in our academic endeavors. To achieve this, it will require working together with our external community through strategic partnerships. This vision must be matched with strategic investments in our core mission, and is a challenge that will only be achieved side-by-side – with our faculty, staff, students, alums and friends - charging on, together.

There's an African proverb that says, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." That is why you will hear the word together quite a bit today.

Our university community has certainly demonstrated the truth in this proverb.

This past year has been filled with suffering and struggle. We have mourned millions of lives lost to a global pandemic ... engaged in painful, but necessary, national discussions on social injustice ... and experienced a presidential transition at the national level unlike any other in our nation's history.

But together, our faculty, staff and students showed they were up to overcoming unprecedented challenges. We witnessed inspiring displays of kindness and compassion. I am deeply proud of the selflessness our Knights displayed in service to others.

We have seen the emergence of innovative ways to work and learn that I am certain will outlast the pandemic. And this pandemic has confirmed that in-person instruction and interaction will always be fundamental to education — and UCF.

Undaunted in our academic pursuits, we landed many competitive grants, including one from NASA that will allow us to explore the deep unknown of outer space.

And while many of us struggled to find our bearings, our arts programs have found new ways to inspire us. This Spring, our talented students and faculty were again able to host UCF Celebrates the Arts, a cultural connection between UCF and our community.

I am proud that so many of us leaned into the challenges of the pandemic and made life better for others — now and for many years to come. And I am even more proud that we did this together!

Fortunately, we have seen the development of a vaccine in record time. Allowing us to look to the future. The excitement of being together in the summer and fall is what motivated me to talk with you today. And I certainly look forward to welcoming our community back this summer in preparation for a more traditional fall semester.

On a personal level, I have been so grateful for the support I have received from the UCF community. Thank you for inviting us in and helping to make Orlando our home. My wife Melinda and I felt your warm welcome, even though we could not connect with you in person.

What I have learned since coming to UCF, facing this pandemic alongside our students, faculty, staff, alums, and partners is this: Nothing can stop our momentum.

Whether our students aspire to explore new planets or change their lives by becoming the first in their family to earn a college degree ...

Whether they aim to save lives through medical advancements or enrich lives through the arts ...

No matter their pasts, or personal circumstances, they are drawn to UCF because they know that here, anything is possible when you reach for the stars. And, through working together, our people make that possible. Our faculty provide the intellectual excellence that challenges us to learn, to question, and to think! Our staff provide an environment where people feel supported.

It is why I also was drawn to UCF.

Like the proverb states, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

We all want this university to go far. Together we can, and we will, go far.

I was trying to think about how best to show the power of togetherness with imagery, and I landed on the Bounce House – something we can all visualize.

Game day is special because, for a few hours, people of various backgrounds and experiences come together, to create an unforgettable experience that lifts us all as one – making our entire stadium "bounce." That can only be done when we work or, in this case, cheer together.

As an institution, we have been accomplishing unprecedented things for 58 years. We have a constantly growing national recognition that UCF is a place where things get done – where students achieve, where faculty are leaders in their disciplines, and where scholarship expands to improve more lives in our community and our world.

And we are just at the beginning of what is possible...

We can clearly become the world's top public metropolitan research university, if we do this together, and in a manner that is uniquely UCF.

As we look forward, we must:

- build an inclusive environment with a culture of compassion at its core,
- become exceptional in our operations, and serve as trustworthy stewards of taxpayer, donor and tuition dollars,
- focus on academic excellence and provide the resources for our people to succeed,
- and partner internally and externally to serve and positively impact our community.

Focusing on these pillars coupled with strategic investment in our academic mission, we will become the top public metropolitan research university.

In everyone I meet at UCF, I see two things: dreams and a determination to make this world a better place.

The determination of our people is why I joined the UCF community, and this is why I am committed to working alongside each of you to make this already great university an even better version of itself.

Higher education changed everything for me. When I came to this country in 1983, I had not graduated high school. Getting my GED allowed me, a first-generation student, to achieve more than I would have ever thought possible. I certainly never thought I would become a professor, a researcher, and eventually a university president.

Standing here today is a long way from not knowing if we would be able to pay rent or where our next meal would come from when I was growing up in the Bahamas.

Education ... A University Degree ... and eventually a PhD ... changed everything.

Kirkwood Community College provided me with the knowledge and skills to transfer to The University of Iowa to pursue my bachelor's degree. I met my wife Melinda at Iowa. We had wonderful friends, played a lot of pool, and enjoyed life as college students. She introduced me to the beauty of the arts and opened my mind to what was possible when one could think beyond the next practical goal. She believed in my vision of trying to get a PhD after earning a GED only a few years early. We accomplished our goals together.

I earned my PhD at the University of Iowa in electrical and computer engineering. And I was so lucky to get a job as a professor at the University at Buffalo, one of the State University of New York system's two AAU institutions. There, I taught, conducted research, and engaged deeply with the university and the entire Buffalo community. I was successful in my teaching and research because I had outstanding collaborators and mentors. My success is due to so many people – faculty, staff, students. Everything was accomplished by working together with amazing people.

While the day-to-day worrying about meals and bills are gone, I will always remember where I came from. It has shaped who I am today. Our higher education degrees changed our lives. My colleagues, my friends, my family all helped to make it possible for me to be President of UCF. Together, they helped an immigrant from the Bahamas to lead this wonderful university.

And, similarly, the UCF of tomorrow, a top 50 public research university, will only be achieved by each of us working together.

A university is, by definition, a collection of colleges. Each serves students in different fields and in different ways. Bringing these colleges together builds something bigger and better than they could ever be on their own.

The same is true for our campus community. Together, we have collective potential.

We all have something unique – and vital – to contribute to UCF, which is why we must create an environment where we feel safe, and free, to be ourselves.

We are fortunate at UCF to have a community, on campus and off, that looks like the future of America.

And if we are to become the best version of UCF that we can be, everyone must feel welcome and included on all of our campuses, every day.

The diversity of background and experience, thought and religion, beliefs and ideals – brought together - makes us better.

It has never been more important for our campuses to be places where we can discuss any topic, learn from one another, and disagree respectfully.

Because, division is no match for empathy. We all need kindness and grace.

We must welcome a free and open exchange of ideas and beliefs. While we may not agree with everything we hear, we become stronger when we consider views that people feel passionately about; and when they consider ours equally.

By creating a place where everyone can be themselves, we collectively become more powerful. Our goals and dreams become more attainable. We grow as individuals, together.

These words must be matched by resources, and we will make strategic investments to support the work many are already championing across campus.

We are in the middle of a national search for a Vice President for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion to be a leader to work across campus, side by side with each of us to deliver action.

We are reviewing our hiring practices to ensure we are not only recruiting the best faculty, staff and researchers in the nation, but that we do so in a way that overcomes our biases.

I have also formed a President's Student Advisory Council with no limits to their discussions and open consideration of their proposed solutions.

Striving toward inclusive excellence, can only be achieved if we commit to it, together.

The collective potential of everyone at UCF is infinite. However, some of our current processes and systems may keep us from reaching that potential. They may be burdensome to our academic and administrative operations and interfere with our success. Timothy Gallway's simple equation illustrates this challenge. Performance is equal to potential minus interference.

The University of Central Florida has grown into a powerhouse, producing in-demand talent, with more than 70,000 students, specialized campuses, and more than 12,000 employees. We are a small city within the community we live.

Our influence in laboratories and boardrooms is evident here in Central Florida and the world over, at organizations like Moderna, Lockheed Martin, Amazon and NASA. Our accomplishments are truly out of this world, orbiting Earth and on the International Space Station. UCF is even on the surface of Mars.

Our impact can be seen in our community – with our faculty and staff conducting work in a way that makes our region and state proud, with our athletes and performers bringing pride to so many on our campuses and beyond, and with our students volunteering in our neighborhoods and city.

Our people have built an engine strong enough to power our students' dreams, our faculty's research goals, and drive broad-based prosperity across our state.

Now, our priority must be fine-tuning this big and powerful engine. We must take a deep dive into our systems and processes, identifying inefficiencies, and developing and implementing solutions that reduce burdens and ensure our time and effort is focused on our mission. We must reduce interference so that we all can reach our potential.

As Plato said, necessity is the mother of invention, and if so, then scarcity is the mother of innovation. Our resources are finite, however, when aligned and directed toward our academic mission, they can be powerful.

We are big, but we can also be fast and nimble. UCF must be able to quickly adapt and respond to an ever-changing world. This was demonstrated during the pandemic — so many here adapted to the global change and kept our mission at the core of their focus.

This commitment to operational excellence is one of the reasons my first hire was Gerald Hector, our senior vice president for administration and finance.

Since arriving in January from Morehouse College, he has been focused on transparently improving our administrative and financial systems. He understands we need to make our business operations as innovative and creative as our classrooms ... as adaptive and resilient as our people. Let's listen to Gerald talk about what he believes can happen at UCF.

VIDEO: Gerald Hector

I hope the one thing you heard from Gerald is the optimism he has for what we can achieve together. We have all the assets needed here; we just need that thread to pull them together. By aligning and improving our operations, we can make our campus a model for higher education. We will achieve our collective goals when we unlock our collective potential.

Our focus on inclusive and operational excellence will directly support the reason we are all here; our core academic mission: teaching, research and service.

There is no doubt that UCF is already a model for academic excellence. The evidence is everywhere.

It is in the work of our staff who advise and counsel our students and build co-curricular experiences that enrich our students' academic experiences.

It is in the work of researchers and graduate students such as Krisztina ZAH-bo, who is exploring how diversity affects team dynamics in the stressful, close confines of space exploration.

It is in the five faculty recently recognized as Reach for the Stars honorees for their work in fields as divergent as planetary sciences and fan culture.

UCF's tradition of excellence is also found in the accomplishments of our Pegasus Professors, including the five most recent honorees; Drs. Batar-SEH, Fer-nan-Dez Vah-jeh, Martinez-Fernandez, SHMIN-key, and Stout who have dedicated their careers to their scholarship and teaching.

We have hundreds of wonderful faculty and researchers, including Dr. Peter Delfyett, a Distinguished Professor, University Trustee Chair and the Pegasus Professor of Optics & Photonics. Optics is an area close to my heart, and Peter's election to the National Academy of Engineering is well-deserved. His career is excellence personified and his passion for higher education and UCF was evident when we spoke to him recently. Let's watch.

VIDEO: Peter Delfyett

Like Peter's work in optics and in so many other areas, our faculty are continuously improving the lives of others. That is because our core academic mission includes teaching, research, and service.

Whether it's providing innovative medical care in Lake Nona, creating the tools to reach further into outer space, or bringing beauty to the world on the stage, our successes drive impact when they improve our communities.

As we focus on academic excellence, I am reminded of a quote; "vision without resources is a hallucination." That means we must invest in faculty and staff who will continue strengthening and supporting our academic enterprise.

We are lucky to have faculty who not only teach, but mentor students and serve our community. We have staff who go above and beyond to make this possible.

We must address that our faculty and staff in some areas are overcommitted. That while we are proud of our achievements in access and social mobility, we must prioritize our future investments to meet the demands these achievements have created.

Moving forward, we will hire more faculty and staff in strategic areas because we want our people to have the time to teach, research and change lives.

For our leaders, we must always support our faculty and staff's capacity to teach and inspire.

Together, we must provide the room for our faculty members and advisors to have the time to build relationships with our students ... to help them discover their areas of interest ... to explore research that enhances their shared scholarship experience ... to mentor today's students so they become tomorrow's thought leaders.

Our focus on inclusive, operational, and academic excellence must be matched with partnerships and activities that allow us to be the partner our region needs. Because all thriving cities have thriving universities, and UCF is Orlando's Hometown University.

Honestly, I cannot imagine being anywhere else this past year because it has allowed me to see Knight Nation at its best.

We are emerging from this past year with a richness of experiences, a demonstrated ability to work together, and a deeper appreciation for the little things we may have taken for granted.

It has never been a better time to be a Knight. We are stronger together.

To continue on and accelerate our trajectory toward becoming one of the world's top public metropolitan research universities, we must tell the story of our commitment to fostering success for our students, faculty and staff.

We must highlight our achievements – past, present, and future - to inspire others to invest in our great work.

Our future is driven by you. Your ideas. Your research. Your dreams.

This is OUR university.

I am proud to be a Knight. I am here to support you, our leadership team is here to support you, and I have complete confidence that our university will continue to innovate and be a national leader in higher education. Working together, we will become a public metropolitan research university that is focused on our societal impact in Central Florida and the entire world.

Thank you so much for what you do every day to continue building the University of Central Florida to be the best place in the world to learn, to research, to create, and to positively impact society.

Go Knights. Charge on.