

**January 2014 Convocation  
Northern Kentucky University  
Geoffrey S. Mearns**

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. It is an honor to serve as the president of Northern Kentucky University.

And it is a pleasure to welcome you to our January convocation. Thank you for attending this special event.

I am joined this morning by my wife, Jennifer. Jennifer, thank you for your support of NKU – and thank you for your support of me.

Jennifer and I hope that each of you had a peaceful and restful holiday. And we hope that you cherished these precious times with your families and with your friends.

I am also joined by several members of our Board of Regents:

- Chair Dennis Repenning
- Secretary Nathan Smith
- Faculty Regent Jacqueline Emerine
- Staff Regent Steve Meier
- Student Regent Erik Pederson

Thank you for joining us today. And thank you for your service.

On behalf of the Regents, I wish all of you a healthy and productive new year. Working together, I know it will be another great year for our University and our community.

And that is the principal purpose of my presentation this morning: to discuss with you our future. Specifically, I want to share with you the key elements of our new strategic plan. This plan will guide us for the next five years – through 2018, the 50th anniversary of the founding of this institution.

I will also discuss how we will implement our new strategic plan. I encourage you to join me in this important effort. I need your help.

But before I get started, please permit me to introduce to you one of the newest members of our University community – Sue Ott Rowlands, our new Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost.

There are many reasons why I selected Sue – and why I believe she will make a great contribution to our University and to our students.

I was impressed with the breadth and depth of her academic leadership experience at several prominent universities. Most recently, Sue served as Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences at Virginia Tech. In leading one of Virginia Tech's largest and most diverse academic colleges, she mentored and supported more than 900 faculty and staff who served more than 5,000 students.

In addition to her extensive experience, I was particularly impressed with Sue's collaborative and engaging leadership style. I am confident that she will contribute to our University's culture – a culture that is characterized by mutual respect and shared responsibility.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming Sue Ott Rowlands to Northern Kentucky University.

Welcome, Sue. I look forward to working with you.

So, now, let us discuss our future – and the strategic plan that will guide our work.

Throughout the planning process, I began each open forum by recalling our history. This morning, I would also like to begin by reflecting on our past. I do so for two reasons.

First, an important part of our history is the basis for why we chose to call this plan "Fuel the Flame."

In 1968, when this institution was founded, our predecessors considered six different designs for the new crest. While the proposed designs varied in several respects, there was one consistent element: a flame.

The flame, which has always graced the seal of our University, represents enlightenment. The flame symbolizes our collective quest for knowledge, for truth, and for beauty. That quest continues today with you and with me.

The flame also symbolizes our appreciation that, within the mind and within the heart of each student, there is a natural spark of curiosity and desire. At our University, we embrace a special responsibility to transform that innate spark into a lifelong passion for greater understanding, for a commitment to excellence, and for a desire to serve.

The second reason I choose to remember our history this morning is to recall the spirit embodied by the women and men who founded and built this University. Today, their legacy continues to inspire us to believe – to believe that, with ambition, with planning, and with hard work, great success is possible.

I have two photographs that will vividly illustrate my point.

This first photograph was taken in 1968, the year that our institution was founded. In this location, our founding faculty and staff built this University from the ground up.

This second photograph was taken this past summer, when the weather was just a bit better than it is today. This photograph depicts our modern comprehensive metropolitan University.

Together, these two photographs provide compelling motivation. They demonstrate what we can achieve together when we embrace a bold vision, when we develop a good plan, and when we execute that plan with discipline and with determination.

The process that produced our plan is also consistent with our tradition – with our values. For the process engaged many, many people – both within our University and throughout our region.

The process was led by a committee that I introduced to you at this event last year. The members of the committee were:

- Rick Boyce
- Chuck Brown
- Dana Harley
- Zach Hart
- Stephanie Hughes
- Denise Robinson
- Mary Paula Schuh
- Arnie Slaughter
- Diane Sticklen-Jordan

And representing more than 15,000 students was Katie Cox.

The work of the committee was supported by:

- Kerri Beach
- Sue Hodges Moore
- Vickie Natale

I had the privilege of serving as the chair of this outstanding team. And I can personally attest to how hard they all worked on behalf of our University. Please show them how much we appreciate their extraordinary effort.

The committee benefitted by receiving input from thousands of people. There were several work groups and many open forums, both on campus and in the community.

The committee also circulated a comprehensive survey that was completed by nearly 1,000 faculty and staff and nearly 2,000 students. And here is one compelling fact about the people who responded to the survey: the largest number of students who responded to the lengthy survey were our seniors – women and men who will soon graduate, but who are still personally invested in the future of our University. Their investment – their commitment – gives us great optimism that we will thrive.

This extensive and inclusive process produced the strategic plan that our Board of Regents approved at its meeting in November.

The plan includes a new mission statement, which is now displayed on the screen.

This mission statement is a concise articulation of our University's fundamental purpose – why we exist.

I want to highlight a few important elements in this mission statement.

With respect to teaching and learning, we are innovative – and we put our students at the center of this critical activity.

With respect to research, scholarship, and creative endeavors, our work must enhance the core educational experience or be relevant to the external community we serve.

And we have two paramount aspirations: we aspire to empower our students to have fulfilling careers and meaningful lives, and we aspire to contribute to the vitality of our metropolitan region.

The strategic plan also articulates our vision – what we expect to achieve by 2018.

This vision consists of five discrete elements. This vision recognizes that, in order to enhance our region, our students must be prepared to succeed in an increasingly competitive and dynamic world. This vision also recognizes that our success depends on cultivating all of our assets – our physical resources, our financial resources, and most importantly our human resources.

Finally, this vision requires us to develop and support a portfolio of distinctive academic programs.

The strategic plan highlights five core values. These are the essential values that characterize how we – how all of us – perform our work.

We will promote a culture that fosters *excellence* in all that we do – in every program, in every activity and service, and in every person.

We will engage in honest, fair, and ethical behavior – with *integrity* at the heart of every decision and every action.

As we conduct our work – how we teach and learn and how we serve – we will embrace creativity and *innovation*.

In all dimensions of our work, we will celebrate *inclusiveness*, diversity, and global awareness.

And we will maintain a climate that is characterized by *collegiality* – built on mutual respect and open and honest communication, all of which culminate in an abiding commitment to shared responsibility.

Now, I would like to spend a few minutes discussing the goals of our new strategic plan.

These five goals are the central components of the plan. Each of the goals has a few specific objectives, and each objective is supported by several discrete tactics.

Student success is the first goal, because it is our most important goal. And the other four goals are designed to support student success.

At the core of our institutional mission is our individual and collective responsibility to provide a student-centered educational experience that promotes academic success, global awareness, and timely graduation.

Within this goal, there are five objectives. These objectives acknowledge that we are preparing our students to work and live in an increasingly dynamic and competitive world.

To succeed in this world, we know that we must set high standards for our students. Indeed, based on the survey responses we received from our students, they know that they should be challenged here, so that they are well prepared for the world that they will encounter after graduation. They have asked us to maintain and increase the academic rigor of our programs, and we will do so.

We are also working and living in an increasingly diverse and global society. In order for our students to succeed in this environment, we must expose them now to different cultures and different perspectives.

And to ensure that our students graduate on time, we must do more to help them overcome the substantial financial challenges they face. In the 21st century, access and opportunity increasingly require us to maintain affordability.

Every day, I learn about the many ways our faculty and staff contribute to the success of our students. Let me share one recent example with you.

At the September meeting of the Board of Regents, one of our outstanding students, John Crum, gave a presentation about his undergraduate research project. John is a senior, majoring in biology. His faculty advisor is Dr. Erin Strome, a biology professor.

John's research examined whether specific genes increase the risk of developing cancer. John conducted research to determine whether one particular gene – MSH5 – increases the likelihood that a person will develop breast cancer.

Now, as a former English major who barely passed introductory biology in college, I must confess that I didn't understand all of the technical details of John's presentation. But, in my defense, it was a pretty sophisticated presentation.

There was one aspect of his presentation, though, that I fully comprehended – and that I will never forget.

At the end of the presentation, John told the Regents how his undergraduate research experience changed his life – not just his educational experience here at NKU, but his life.

John admitted that, prior to this experience, he was very introverted. In fact, he hadn't even been able to talk to a faculty member about the possibility of supervising his project.

According to John, he finally summoned the courage and sent an email to Professor Strome. She then interviewed him, and she agreed to supervise his research project.

John described the simple act of sending an email as one of the best decisions he had made in his life. He said, "I met people I'll never forget. Friends for life. I've made memories for life."

With respect to his advisor, John told the Regents that Professor Strome was "really fun, yet still professional."

Then he said, Professor Strome "demanded more responsibility for my actions than anybody else in my life. She has helped me to be more confident, yet stay humble."

John concluded his remarks by describing his research experience with Professor Strome this way: "It has not only made me a better scientist, but also a better person."

This special story demonstrates the abiding value of the personal relationship between a teacher and a student. Here at NKU, we value those personal relationships because we know that they are critical to enabling us – each member of our faculty and staff – to fan the innate spark of curiosity and desire that flickers within each one of our students.

We value a personal relationship between a teacher and a student, because it is an essential element that enables us to fuel the flame.

John Crum and his faculty advisor, Professor Strome, are here with us this morning. Please stand, so that we can recognize your inspirational partnership.

Thank you, John.

Thank you, Erin.

The second goal in our new strategic plan is talent development.

This goal reflects our University's responsibility to support and collaborate with our educational partners across the entire spectrum of human growth and development – from pre-kindergarten to post-secondary education and beyond.

To increase the number of women and men who have college degrees, we need to increase our enrollment of all types of students – traditional college students, transfer students from two-year institutions, and post-traditional students, including returning adult students and military veterans.

To increase the number of students who are ready for a rigorous, demanding college education, we must provide more support for our educational partners.

And most importantly, to prepare our students to thrive in a dynamic world, we must instill in all of our students a lifelong passion for learning. That passion for knowledge and understanding is the most important attribute for future success.

The third goal is academic innovation.

This goal represents our continuing commitment to be a leader in developing new and more effective approaches to teaching and learning – and to research and scholarship. In essence, we must sustain and develop academic programs that are innovative, distinctive, experiential, and transdisciplinary.

This academic innovation is vital to the success of our increasingly diverse student body. These students – our students – need and expect a variety of learning opportunities – traditional classroom environments, hybrid and on-line courses and programs, and competency-based educational programs.

We will also expand upon our emerging strength in transdisciplinary teaching and research. In an increasingly dynamic environment, this academic innovation is vital to our efforts to distinguish our University from other institutions.

Transdisciplinary teaching builds and expands upon principles of interdisciplinary teaching by emphasizing an integrated, holistic approach to studying topics and issues that arise at the intersection of various fields, such as business, science, law, culture, and technology.

During the strategic planning process, the committee frequently heard from our faculty, staff, and students that transdisciplinary education prepares students to solve current and emerging problems.

The committee heard a similar message from employers. They told us that they want to hire graduates who have the critical thinking skills that are developed when students are taught to draw upon and integrate knowledge from different disciplines.

The College of Informatics is one prominent example of our University's innovative approach to transdisciplinary teaching and research. The secret of our success in this dynamic

field is the number and variety of collaborative relationships that the College has developed with departments in all of the other colleges at our University.

And the key element of this success across our University is our faculty. There are many excellent examples. Permit me to share two with you.

The first example is a course is called “Principles of Informatics.” This course has been taught for a couple of years, and it was recently approved for general education credit.

The focus of this course is on the concept of “information” as applied to a wide range of topics. The goal is to help students understand how information in the digital age affects their lives in so many ways.

One of the principal architects of this course is Dr. Rudy Garns, a professor in the philosophy department. In designing and teaching the course, Professor Garns worked closely with faculty colleagues in computer science, biology, history, English, business informatics, and communication studies. These professors incorporate their knowledge and perspectives from diverse disciplines to provide our students with new ways to answer difficult questions about security, privacy, and freedom.

This course demonstrates the value of transdisciplinary approaches to education.

Two days ago, Dr. Tamara O’Callaghan, an English professor, provided another example of the value of transdisciplinary teaching and research. Her work is in the area of “digital humanities.” Professor O’Callaghan impressed and entertained the Board of Regents by demonstrating the technology that she is using to bring medieval literature to life.

In collaboration with another scholar of medieval literature, Professor O’Callaghan is using “Augmented Reality” software to inspire her students to read and explore Chaucer’s “The Canterbury Tales.” When this project is completed, her students will be able to use iPads and other “smart devices” to view digital enhancements that emerge from a page. Once the page is scanned, the supplementary materials – videos, audio files, and three-dimensional models of medieval artifacts and architecture – will display on the screen.

For example, when students read about the pilgrims’ travels to Canterbury Cathedral, her students can view a 3-D rendering of the cathedral. Her students will also be able to watch an expert discuss the cultural and historical significance of a particular passage.

Dr. Callaghan’s work blends 14th century poetry with 21st century technology. And, as far as we know, this project is one of the first of its kind.

These two examples of transdisciplinary teaching and research demonstrate that traditional liberal arts disciplines remain vital to a 21st century education. Indeed, by extending these traditional disciplines and incorporating them into emerging fields, our University will become a leader in higher education and a truly distinctive institution.



Professor O'Callaghan could not join us today, because she is at the annual conference of the Modern Language Association, where she is presenting her innovative project. But Professor Garns is with us this morning. Rudy, please stand so that we may recognize your creative leadership.

Thank you, Rudy.

Our fourth goal is *community engagement*.

Under the leadership of my predecessor, Jim Votruba, community engagement became a hallmark of this University. Community engagement is now part of our institutional DNA.

We intend to build on this strength by expanding our partnerships with non-profit organizations, civic associations, and government agencies. By supporting our regional partners, we will continue to catalyze economic growth and promote civic vitality.

The fifth and final goal is *institutional excellence*.

This goal is the foundation that will enable us to achieve the other four goals.

Our success depends upon maintaining and expanding the facilities and the technology that our students, faculty, and staff need to teach and learn effectively.

Our success depends upon our ability to use our financial resources efficiently and to budget those resources strategically.

Our success also depends on our ability to generate new resources.

In that regard, I continue to urge our elected officials to allocate state support for universities based on each institution's current performance and productivity. The Council on Postsecondary Education, at its meeting in November, unanimously passed a resolution expressing the Council's recognition that the current funding approach is flawed. I am gratified that the Council is now committed to developing a comprehensive, strategic funding model. That's very good news.

Unfortunately, the Council does not intend to create that new model for the upcoming biennium. Instead, the Council intends to implement the new model for the 2016/18 biennium.

That's good, but it's not good enough. So, I will continue to advocate for more prompt progress on this important issue.

Just before the holidays, I sent a letter to Governor Beshear, urging him to develop a new funding model *now*. I don't think we should wait two more years to discard a funding approach that was created for the 20th century. The world is changing too rapidly. We need a funding model for the 21<sup>st</sup> century – and we need it *now*.

Our students deserve it.

And all of the taxpayers of the Commonwealth deserve it.

But, to be frank, we cannot be sure that Frankfort will resolve this difficult issue in the next session. I sincerely hope that our elected officials will. But there are a lot of tough issues on their agenda, and the upcoming budget will be very tight.

So, we must generate more financial support from our alumni, and from corporate and community partners, and from our friends. We must continue to demonstrate that philanthropic investments in our University can produce great returns – great returns for our students and for our region.

In that regard, I am pleased to spread some good news about our NKU Foundation. As of January 1, for the first time in its history, the Foundation's total assets exceed \$100 million.

This achievement is the product of the generosity of many, many people – including so many of you. Thank you.

This achievement is also the product of the women and men who volunteer their time and expertise to serve on the NKU Foundation Board. Their prudent stewardship has enabled our endowment to grow, even in very difficult economic times. Thank you for your service.

Our most important asset, though, continues to be our people – our talented faculty and our dedicated staff.

That is why our future success depends so much on our continuing ability to attract and retain outstanding people. And our success depends more than ever on our commitment to support the professional development and personal wellbeing of each member of our faculty and staff.

*You* fuel the flame within each student. We must do so for each one of you.

Let me share one representative example of the extraordinary men and women who serve and inspire our students – and a man who inspires me, as well.

Each year, the Administration and Finance Division recognizes one staff member with the Outstanding Service Award. This year's recipient is Mr. Louis Griffin.

Louie, as he prefers to be called, works at NKU delivering mail in several of our buildings on campus. As a result, he works with lots of people – and Louie knows everyone's name.

Louie greets everyone, every day, with a friendly smile. He treats every person with respect, and his optimistic personality inspires others to serve with similar enthusiasm and with the same dedication.

Louie also inspires us with his passion for learning. He received a bachelor's degree in French from NKU in 2006. He's now taking classes to earn a second undergraduate degree. He speaks several languages, including French, German, and Japanese. He also plays several instruments including the piano, the guitar, the saxophone, and the drums.

Louie is a true renaissance man. His commitment to serve and his passion for learning are an inspiration to all. He fuels the flame in each one of us.

Mr. Louis Griffin, please stand so that we can express our appreciation to you.

Louie, it is a privilege to serve with you.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is our new strategic plan – a plan that will guide us through challenging times to a future filled with great promise and potential.

It took a lot of work to complete this plan. And I am very grateful to all of you for your input, your guidance, and your support.

But now the real work begins, because implementation of the plan is the most important part of the entire process. All across our campus, we must work together to implement this plan. Successful implementation of our plan requires discipline and determination – patience and persistence. And all of us – *all of us* – must accept shared responsibility for this collective effort.

As the first step, I will appoint several cross-divisional teams that will develop University-wide implementation plans. Then, every college, department, and division will develop specific plans that align with and support the University's overall plan.

Throughout this implementation process, we must dedicate existing resources and target future investments to our highest priorities. Given the limited state support we receive and the increasing financial pressures on our students and their families, we must allocate our resources strategically if we are going to succeed.

Finally, over the next few months, we will identify performance metrics in order to monitor our progress toward the results we want to achieve. These metrics will help us answer critical questions about our performance, such as: Are we enrolling more students who are prepared to meet our high standards? Are our students progressing and graduating in a timely manner? Do our graduates have the critical thinking skills and a passion for learning that will enable them to pursue successful careers and to lead meaningful lives?

Let me take just a few moments to elaborate on the cross-divisional implementation teams.

The first implementation team is an enrollment strategies team.

This team has already been working for two months.

The team has completed its first phase, developing specific enrollment strategies and targets for next Fall. As our faculty and staff implement these strategies, the team will develop strategies for the next two to five years.

Under the leadership of our new provost, a team consisting of faculty and academic administrators will develop an academic master plan. Among other things, this plan will include specific strategies to expand transdisciplinary approaches to teaching and experiential learning opportunities across the spectrum of academic programs at NKU.

A team consisting of faculty and staff will recommend specific steps to enhance our efforts to support our students' success. We have aggressively implemented new student retention strategies in the last 18 months, but our current retention and graduation rates are subpar. We must make significant improvement in these areas.

As I mentioned a moment ago, we must align our resources with our strategic priorities. A financial resources team will recommend strategies to garner new resources, optimize the use of existing resources, and enhance our current budget development processes.

A marketing team will produce a coordinated collection of strategies to enhance our University's public image and to help us develop a distinctive brand identity. We are in the process of engaging an external consultant to provide additional expertise to support this important effort.

Last month, I decided to create a new position: the Senior Advisor to the President for Inclusive Excellence. I have now appointed a committee to lead the search to fill this position. Once the search is completed, this person will lead a team in identifying strategies to help make our campus more diverse – and to ensure that all members of our University community are included fully in University programs and activities.

A few minutes ago, I spoke about the need to invest more in our most important asset – our people. A human and organizational development team will identify specific steps to ensure that we continue to attract, retain, and develop outstanding faculty and staff. This team will also make recommendations to sustain a healthy, high-performing organization.

Over the last ten years, our University has invested time and money to maintain and enhance our facilities – and to make our campus more beautiful. A facilities team will update our campus master plan, with increased attention on incorporating sustainability initiatives across our campus.

Over the last ten years, we have also invested time and money in information technology. That investment is very important. A technology support team, which will include the people who use that technology – our faculty, staff, and students – will recommend ways to ensure that our continued investment in information technology is effective and efficient.

The final cross-divisional implementation team will identify strategies that ensure that our University continues to engage in those external activities that support the civic and social vitality of our community, the Commonwealth, and our metropolitan region.

I have spent some time identifying these groups and explaining their responsibilities because the implementation of our plan is so important. Indeed, it is our determined efforts to implement our strategic plan that will make our University truly distinctive. Only through the hard work of implementing this plan can we ensure that, in 2018, when we mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our founding, we will have many successes to celebrate.

As we embark upon the path that will lead us to that destination, let us recall the spirit and dedication that fueled the women and men who founded and built our University. All that we have been fortunate to inherit today, and all that we will achieve tomorrow, can be traced to the initial spark that they created and fueled.

In the 18 months that I have been associated with Northern Kentucky University, I have had the good fortune to meet several of these special people. They are women and men just like you and me. And they had the audacity to believe that they could transform farmland into a modern, comprehensive University. Their ambitious dreams came true, because they had an abiding faith in their collective potential – and because they committed themselves to the hard work that was required to achieve that potential.

I recently met one of those founders – a woman whose individual story is representative of hundreds and hundreds of her colleagues and our predecessors. Her name is Becky Myers.

Becky started at NKU in August 1972. She began working here the first day that our University held classes on this campus in Highland Heights. She was just 17 years old.

That first semester, Becky and her colleagues collected tuition in cash and checks. But they didn't have a cash register. So, they gave each student a handwritten receipt, and they put the money in a small box that they kept under the counter in their office.

All across campus, faculty and staff were short on supplies. Becky recalled that, one day during that first year, she received a handwritten request from Mildred Crane – the “mother of the law school.” Mildred wanted authorization and funding to make a critical purchase – she wanted to buy a pair of scissors. The justification on the handwritten note simply read, “Because the law school has only one pair of scissors.”

When I met with Becky a few weeks ago, she commented on many of the changes that took place during her years at our University.

When she started in 1972, there were only a few buildings and a few small houses. The ceramics complex consisted of a farm and a barn. Today, we have a large, modern campus, which includes Griffin Hall, the Bank of Kentucky Center, and this beautiful Student Union.

In 1972, the swimming pool was in the backyard of a house on the corner of John's Hill Road and University Drive. Today, we have a recreation center that will soon be expanded to meet the needs of more than 15,000 students.

And at the center of our campus was a retaining pond that was affectionately, yet sarcastically, called "Lake Inferior." Today, we have "Loch Norse," which is one of many attractive features of our beautiful campus.

Becky also recalled that, when she started, the elevators in Nunn Hall weren't working. Well, I guess, despite our progress, some things don't change.

In fact, since our University was founded, some good and very important things haven't changed.

Becky told me that the faculty and staff "knew each other by name, and we all worked together to get things done."

I continue to be impressed with the dedication of our faculty and staff – and their shared commitment to our collective goals. Becky's commitment was fueled by a belief that her colleagues supported her personal development. Becky told me, "My colleagues always saw something in me that I didn't see in myself."

This support fueled a commitment to our University that was selfless – and very personal. Here's how Becky described the relationship she had with her colleagues: "We raised our children together. We attended each other's weddings. And we buried our parents... together."

Becky devoted 39 years of her life to our University. She worked with every president – except one. She retired shortly before I arrived.

But I am honored that Becky is with me this morning. Becky, please stand so that we may express our gratitude to you and to the women and men with whom you served.

Becky told me that the reason that she and so many other women and men dedicated their lives to our University was because they believed that their contributions made a difference – a difference in the lives of our students, and a difference in the future of our community and our Commonwealth.

Well, Becky, the simple, profound truth is that you are right: your contribution – and the selfless service of every member of our University community – those contributions did, indeed, make a difference.

And the significance of your personal story is that it provides the inspiration for each one of us today. For each one of us now has the opportunity to extend your legacy. Each one of us has the opportunity – and the responsibility – to contribute to the success of our new strategic plan. Each one of us can fuel the flame. And each one of us can then bask with pride in the warmth of the fire that will blaze on our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Thank you, Becky.

And thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for your commitment and for your service. I look forward to working with you.

Now it is my pleasure to introduce Becky's daughter, Jennifer Myers Scott, who is a proud NKU alumnae. Jen is going to share a song with us.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for joining us this morning. Let's go to work!