

Opening Day Town Hall Meeting

September 3, 2019

As prepared by Westfield State University President Ramon S. Torrecilha, Ph.D.

Good morning.

Welcome back faculty, I hope you had a restorative summer.

I also want to welcome back the staff, many of whom were here during the summer months, hopefully you were able to get away for some relaxing time and fun.

I had a good summer; for me summer was time for introspection; a time for reflection.

I turned 60 years old this summer. I must confess, I don't care much about celebrating my birthday. But this year, I found myself being more introspective compared to years past. I found myself asking where did time go? Not that I am about to expire, but where did life go? And more pressing this year, what's ahead for me? Perhaps another 20 more good years, maybe 25. It is sobering to stare at life and mortality at the same time. I am determined to make every year, every day count like never before. I feel a sense of urgency to life.

This summer I also experienced uneasiness, sadness and anger about the state of affairs in our country. Like many of you, I have grown tired of the divisive narrative and constant attack on immigrants. I am an immigrant. I am saddened by the epidemic of mass shootings in our country and appalled by the lack of response from elected officials everywhere. I am concerned about the assault on women's reproductive rights and the recent gag order imposed by the Trump administration which led Planned Parenthood to opt out of Title X. And, I am angry that I continue to experience harassment right here in the city of Westfield because of my sexual orientation.

This summer I also reflected on the vote of no confidence of last spring and the charged atmosphere of our campus. I heard the community asking for a different type of presidency. I heard the community asking for greater engagement with me and members of my Cabinet. And, I am prepared to respond affirmatively and proactively to your call so that we can move forward.

During the second year of my presidency, FY17-18, we were able to bring \$40M to Westfield State. A very large sum and, if I say so, a significant achievement for such a young presidency. I did not do this alone, and in order to secure these moneys, I spent countless hours off campus, making the case for Westfield State to elected officials, the business community, higher education and K-12 partners, alumni, and donors. I know that the infusion of this resource is benefiting the institutions already and I am pleased that we lifted the standing of Westfield State in our city, region, our State, and in the higher education community nationally.

Now, I need to do more work at home, with all of your help.

As stated in my message to the community last week, I look forward to being more visible on campus, holding office hours without the need for an appointment or agenda, hold unstructured conversations with members of the community about pressing issues affecting higher education

and our campus, meeting more often with students, making Board materials available to all, and evaluating the budget process to make it more informative for all, in an effort to have a more engaging and transparent process.

In turn, I encourage and ask that all of you for greater engagement with me and the cabinet. I am confident that as a community motivated by our shared passion for student success, we will be able to overcome the issues that separated us last spring. And that we can come together as a community and model civility, inclusion and respect. I also hope we will help one another challenge and correct false narratives in our country, our communities and here in our campus.

At a past retreat of the Cabinet, the moderator encouraged us to think of the presidency at Westfield State more broadly; to move away from limiting the presidency concept to just me or the Office of the President. Over the last few years, when we as a Cabinet discuss the presidency, we have a broader view that incorporates all of us. The “presidency” will do its part by enlisting the engagement measures I have mentioned, hopefully resulting in more frequent exchanges on our campus through formal and informal communication channels.

Much of what we set out to accomplish and communicate will focus on Westfield State’s relevancy.

This summer, I spent time reading and reflecting on the state of public higher education. The structures of higher education remain populated by familiar casts – staff, administrators, faculty members, students. Yet, we find ourselves in unfamiliar spaces in part because of global, economic, and technological dislocations. Institutions of higher education, public or otherwise, are being forced to deal with dramatic demographic change, growing skepticism about the value of higher education, diminishing federal and state support, and escalating tuition and student debt. Westfield State University is not immune to these challenges. In fact, for our University to remain relevant will require a constant assessment of how we do our work and whom we are serving.

Twenty-first-century business and organizations follow the structure of the internet: faster, team-based, multitasking. Higher education institutions continue to be aligned with the workplace of the past. Students everywhere must experience different pedagogies for different purposes; for example, lectures to model sustained thinking, online learning for student-generated knowledge, and active learning for team-based work. Data analytics, and technological skills are core skills that must be integrated throughout the curriculum and expected of every graduate to master. Employers continue to value traditional arts and letters skills such as communication, cross-cultural competency, synthetic thinking, and the ability to read the room. These are not soft skills, but necessary skills. The curriculum should integrate social skills regardless of major. Industry expectations for entry-level positions continue to evolve, new graduates are competing with those who have years of work experience. To sharpen the employability of our graduates and increase the likelihood of their ability to move from entry-level to advanced work, we must integrate academic and career experience across the four years, leading to continuous applied experience gained during—and throughout—college.

Finally, the current model of a four-year-education-and-you-are done is outdated. The pace of change in every industry and field continue to accelerate. Therefore, lifelong learning *membership* in institutions of higher education allows for continuous learning and ever-changing networks of alumni, faculty to access and contribute to knowledge development.

The real work of leadership in public higher education must be to inspire constituents, and examine and engage the intertwined elements of fast-paced change. Building a premier public comprehensive institution in the Northeast region during this time of change means the values of diversity, community, excellence, engagement and collaboration. These must be actualized in our everyday interaction.

During my first town hall meeting, I stated that our collective purpose is student success. That remains true today. Westfield State has evolved, but our mission remains pretty much the same. We are a public institution offering accessible quality undergraduate and graduate programs in the liberal arts, sciences, and professional studies. Our community focuses on student engagement and success. And, we contributed to the economic, social, and cultural growth of the northeast region by developing the knowledge, skills, and character for students to become responsible leaders and engaged citizens.

I am excited about Westfield State today as I was three-and-half years ago. I believe in our collective efforts and I know that together we will continue to impact lives and serve as an engine for social and economic mobility for our students.

As we work together as a community here at home, and leverage what we have control over to bring about positive change, we can't help but be impacted by external factors, many of which we have little control over.

One factor we rely on quite heavily, is our state appropriation. Although state funding is markedly less than it was years and decades ago, our sister institutions are also subject to state appropriations.

Governor Baker signed the FY19-20 budget at the end of July, 31 days after it was due. This was a challenging budget season, despite considerable growth in revenue streams for the Commonwealth. It was a challenging budget season for the public higher education as we continue to compete for dollars with other sectors. If you had the opportunity to follow the process, you may recall that the House proposed a \$28M allocation for Westfield State University. I knew we had to do better, and as a result considerable time was spent in making the case for a higher appropriation for Westfield State—and it paid off. The Governor recommended an appropriation of \$29,182M—\$1,182 M more than the House. And I am pleased to report that the Senate supported the Governor's recommendation.

We have been successful in securing other resources as well. For example, \$50K earmarked funding will go into renovating a science lab in Wilson Hall; Program Coordinator Lyndsey Nunes and the Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative will benefit from a nearly \$100K grant; and Ryan Meersman is pretty pleased with \$190K worth of grant funding from the

Department of Higher Education to support our Westfield Promise early college program, to name a few.

Early this summer, Vice President Taksar shared with the community the Board approved budget for FY19-20; it has been posted on the web. As you read, the budget requests that were approved were those most closely aligned with the Strategic Plan.

Like our work to communicate more frequently about the budget and in a more transparent way. We are committed to sharing board materials. In addition to our practice of publicly-posted agendas, board materials going along with those agendas will be posted a week after each of full board and board committee meetings. In addition to accessing those materials, I also encourage all of you, schedules permitting, to attend the full board and board committee meetings to gain a fuller understanding of the pressing and current issues involved in the University's strategy.

As part of the budget materials that I mentioned are posted online, you will find a five-year budget projection. These projections are based on a number of assumptions including estimated state appropriations, enrollment, housing occupancy, dining revenue, fundraising, etc. It is impossible to affirm with any certainty if these assumptions will hold, but these projections help us to plan and respond to forthcoming demographic and enrollment changes.

As you have heard me mention throughout my presidency, institutions of higher education in the Northeast are experiencing a decline in enrollment which is projected to increase during the next five years. At Westfield State, we expect a decrease of about 600 students during the next five years. This will impact the institution, but we are confident we can put measures in place to absorb this decline.

For the 2019-20 academic year, enrollment is actually better than initially expected. Our enrollment numbers may change in the next few weeks but we are hoping for a manageable melt. Key to our ability to begin the academic year by welcoming a solid Class of 2023 both in numbers and academic profile, is the hard work of all of you in this room. Collectively, all of you have yourselves to thank for the University's continued success in attracting and retaining 1,071 first-year students and 314 transfer students. Thank you for all your work to inspire, educate, and support all of our students.

I am happy to report also that this past year, we raised approximately \$1.6M. And, Westfield State University has received a 2019 Educational Fundraising Award from the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) for overall improvement, in recognition of significant program growth over a three-year period. Ninety-eight U.S. higher education institutions received awards this year and Westfield State is among 30 institutions to earn its first Educational Fundraising Award this year.

In mid-July, I shared with the community the official approval from the Department of Higher Education for our Strategic Plan. It is true that our Strategic Plan fulfills a state requirement and a NECHE requirement, but the plan will guide the institution for the next five years. I am proud of the fact that the plan maintains our commitment to accessibility and affordability at the same time that it encourages forward-thinking practices that will help define Westfield State as a

premier public comprehensive institution in the Northeast. I want to thank the strategic planning committee and all of you who provided input to this important plan.

As a project that will impact us all, I want to remind you that the Parenzo Hall Renovation project is in full swing. Thank you to the planning and working groups who have provided valuable, continually input as the space utilization study phase comes to a close and the test fit layouts for the renovated buildings are now being further analyzed for feasibility and budget implications. We look forward to sharing more with you at a Sept. 27 Town Hall meeting on this project.

As we welcome new and returning students and other visitors over the next semester, I look forward to us now, more than ever, putting our values into play. The tenets of diversity, community, excellence, engagement and collaboration should be at the forefront of all of our interactions. And, watch for *NewsWise*, the newsletter for and about the Westfield State community, to resume with its first issue of the semester to be emailed this afternoon.

I look forward to a productive, impactful semester that underscores the relevancy of Westfield State University.