President Anne Blackhurst
Inauguration Address ~ Leading for the Long Run
September 26, 2014

Trustee Anderson Kelliher; Chancellor Rosenstone; President Janis; Mayor Williams; Provost Flakholl and our other platform guests; my fellow presidents; college and university delegates; President Emeritus Roland Barden; our Alumni Foundation Board members; our faculty, staff, and students; our MSUM alumni; my colleagues and friends; my loving and supportive family; and all of our guests here today: Welcome to this glorious afternoon on the Minnesota State University Moorhead campus and this historic day in the life of the University.

Thank you for joining in this celebration of Minnesota State University Moorhead’s proud heritage and the promise of its future. In particular, I thank everyone who has contributed to today’s celebration and the week of events leading to this ceremony. In the past few months, we’ve discovered there is a reason installation ceremonies are generally held in the spring, nearly a year after a new president begins the job: It typically takes that long to plan an event of this magnitude. I think you’ll agree that the inauguration advisory committee and all of the implementation teams have done a spectacular job in a relatively brief period of time. That same kind of competence and dedication and can-do spirit characterizes all of our faculty and staff—as well as our students. Today, more than ever, I am honored and humbled to stand before you as your 11th president.

As you know, the theme for today’s ceremony is “Leading for the Long Run.” In part, of course, the theme is a play on my passion for long distance running. The theme also conveys my commitment to longevity as your president and my intention to stay long enough to bring about both lasting change and stability at the University.

What might not be as obvious is that “Leading for the Long Run” is an invitation to think about the qualities that are necessary for this university, or any organization, to thrive in a future that is unknown—and largely unknowable—today. Perhaps most important, the theme provides an opportunity to consider how the university can lead the change efforts that will be necessary for all of us, including our students, their families, and their communities, to thrive in the future.

So, how do you prepare for the long run when you don’t know what the endgame looks like? What are the changes we should be making now so that we’re ready for the challenges and opportunities of the future? And how can we position ourselves to be leaders in the creation of that future rather than simply reacting, or worse, being left behind?

Certainly, strategic thinking—and, more importantly, strategic action—will be critical to our ability to lead for the long run. But even more important than strategy will be the organizational qualities and capabilities we possess: the way we work together, the values we embody, and our ability to achieve and sustain clarity of purpose. As we begin,
together, to identify and cultivate these qualities, I believe long-distance running—and marathon running in particular—can be an instructive guide.

Although I’ve served as your president for less than 3 months, I’ve come to suspect that the journalist Dan Rather must have been thinking of University leadership when he said, "If all difficulties were known at the outset of a long journey, most of us would never start out at all." Certainly, this is true of marathon running: At the outset of a race, only the distance of the course is certain. Little else about the contest can be known—except, perhaps, that anything is possible.

The marathon, which spans 26.2 miles, commemorates the cross-country run of the soldier Pheidippides from a battlefield near the town of Marathon, Greece, to Athens in 490 B.C. Legend has it that, upon his arrival in Athens, Pheidippides delivered his momentous message in one word, “Victory!” and then promptly fell to the ground and died. Centuries later, this story prompted the Olympic Gold Medalist Frank Shorter to ask, as he passed the 16-mile marker during his first attempt at the marathon, “Why couldn’t Pheidippides have died here?”

Though relatively few marathoners drop dead following the race, it is not uncommon for long-distance runners to collapse immediately after crossing the finish line, utterly spent. In fact, on occasion, a marathon runner collapses within sight of the finish line—literally out of gas, incapable of running even the few steps required to finish the race. Although the poet and playwright T.S. Eliot was not thinking specifically of marathoners, he provided an apt description when he observed, "Only those who risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go."

What is it that compels runners to train for months to endure a race that will test every ounce of their will and, perhaps, reveal their limits? For a select few, the answer might be, “the prospect of winning.” But for the rest of us, winning the race is not an option. It is not even in the realm of possibility.

What motivates most marathoners, I believe, is the drive to achieve all they are capable of. The vast majority of marathoners are not racing against the other runners, or even the clock, but against their previous best effort. This drive to self-actualize—to become the best version of oneself—is not unique to marathoners. It is the force that propels most fully functioning human beings.

I believe the drive to achieve our promise or potential is present in healthy organizations as well as human beings. It’s the same force that has propelled us from a tiny normal school founded to prepare teachers for rural Minnesota to a regional, comprehensive university preparing leaders for the 21st century. That normal school was founded on the promise of improving the lives of Red River Valley residents by providing access to education. Our first students received free tuition if they agreed to stay in Minnesota to teach after graduation. One hundred and twenty-five years and four name changes later, it is still the call to fulfill that promise that defines us as a university.
It is, in part, the promise of higher education as a pathway to a better life—a promise that draws many students to MSUM. A sizeable number of our students are the first in their families to attend college. Many more struggle to put together the resources to pay their tuition. In fact, since our early days as a state college, our students have been known as “scramblers”: students of modest means, who through determination and resourcefulness pursue the promise of a college degree.

There are “scramblers” all around us on our campus today. Students who must choose every month between paying their utilities, or paying for groceries, or paying their tuition bill. Students who work multiple jobs, take out multiple loans, and juggle multiple roles so they can realize the promise of a better life through higher education. Most of us know students who have overcome significant odds to attain their MSUM degrees.

Not all of our students overcome hardship or barriers in order to attain their education. But the vast majority of our students are filled with promise none-the-less: the promise of knowing that the best version of themselves is out there, waiting to be discovered, and the belief that anything is possible.

That promise is what drew us to be educators, to share with others our passion for learning, our love of our subject matter, and our conviction that, through education, we achieve the power to transform not only ourselves, but also our world.

Of course, when we began our careers as educators, we could not have foreseen the challenges facing higher education today. Like the marathoner at the starting line, we could not have known the difficulties ahead of us.

By now, these challenges are familiar to you: declining numbers of high school graduates, increasing numbers of underprepared students, decreasing public support for education, unsustainable funding models, crippling student debt loads, intensifying pressure to justify the value of a college degree, and constant pressure to do more with less—to name just a few.

To achieve our promise as a university and thrive in the long run, we will need to overcome these—and many other—challenges. In short, we will need to demonstrate “grit”—the determination and resolve to persist, even against formidable odds.

Grit is a quality familiar to most marathon runners. And, as it turns out, grit may be the single most important quality in determining success. Study after study has demonstrated—with participants as diverse as school children, salespeople, military cadets, and teachers—that more important than native ability or intelligence is the capacity to bounce back after failure, to keep trying no matter what, and for long periods of time. In other words, grit—the passion and perseverance for long-term goals—greatly increases the likelihood of success in the long run. In fact, one definition of grit, according to University of Pennsylvania professor Dr. Angela Duckworth, is living life like it’s a marathon, rather than a sprint.
At MSUM, we have demonstrated grit many times in our 125-year history. In the 1930s, when we lost our campus to fire, we came back bigger and better than ever. We also emerged with the coolest mascot in the country—and the perfect symbol for the situation at hand: We are dragons. Fierce. Formidable. With fire in our bellies and courage in our hearts. We will not be slayed by the challenges before us. Rather, we will embrace the challenge because we believe that our promise, and our purpose, is worth it.

It is reassuring that, as we step to the starting line together, we begin our journey from a position of considerable strength, building on an academic enterprise that is strong at the core and undergirded by the exceptional talent and extraordinary dedication of our faculty and staff.

But as I've already noted, in marathon running, as in life, stepping up to the starting line well prepared for the race is rarely enough. It helps to be able to draw upon a history of successful racing. The drive to improve and the grit to dig deep during the challenging parts of the race are also essential. But, in the final miles, completing the marathon comes down to belief—belief in yourself and the importance of your goals.

At MSUM, our belief in the power of higher education has been present since our founding. Our first president, Livingston Lord, was motivated to lead the Moorhead Normal School by his conviction that the normal school model of the time fell short. Teachers, in President Lord’s view, needed more than professional preparation. He believed teachers should be broadly and rigorously schooled in the liberal arts and sciences, in addition to the practice of teaching. This integration of liberal education and field-specific preparation was uncommon, even unorthodox, at the time. President Lord demonstrated the courage, the belief, to craft a normal school that would fulfill his vision—a vision that’s never been more relevant than it is today.

Today, our world needs leaders who can work across disciplines and professional boundaries to solve complex problems. Our employers seek graduates who can think critically and communicate clearly; who are creative and entrepreneurial and adaptable; who have a strong work ethic and an unwavering commitment to ethical practice; and who possess the ability to work across networks and cultures to exert influence. Our communities need citizens who are committed to applying their education in service to others and the common good.

In short, our world needs universities that demonstrate the courage to both reimagine themselves and stay true to their original purposes. The challenges we face as higher education institutions mean that we simply cannot continue to do business as usual. And yet, the challenges facing our world in the 21st century mean that now, more than ever, we need an educated citizenry with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions provided by a liberal education.

At Minnesota State University Moorhead, we have always believed in the transformative power of higher education. Put another way, we have always believed that our purpose is to transform the world by transforming lives. Today, as in the days of our
founding, achieving that purpose will require providing access to an extraordinary and affordable education for all Minnesotans and partnering with the communities we serve to help solve their most challenging problems.

In particular, we will need to focus relentlessly on student achievement and students’ return on their investment in an MSUM education. We will need to embed and support diversity in every facet of the university. And we will need to make MSUM indispensable to the social, cultural, and economic advancement of our region.

This is the legacy handed to us by our forbearers, men and women of courage and grit, who—though they could not possibly have foreseen the changes, and challenges, ahead—understood that education would be essential to any future worth living. In that way, perhaps our journey is more like a relay than a marathon: As we accept the baton from those who have led before us, we commit to creating a university that is even stronger, more resilient, and more prepared for the long run. And we pledge to provide future generations of students the hope and opportunity essential to their families and communities—so they have the tools to successfully navigate challenges we cannot imagine today.

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Long distance running is generally viewed as a solitary sport. And, it’s true that marathoners typically log hundreds, if not thousands, of miles alone with their thoughts. But for many marathoners, myself included, the true joy of running is experiencing the community that exists on race day. That’s when we experience how much more satisfying it is to run when we’re surrounded by other runners who share the same goal—and how our combined focus propels us, even when we think we can’t go any further. As Kristin Armstrong, runner and author of the book Mile Markers, observed, ”Do not underestimate the intimacy of running, and the people with whom you share your miles.”

It’s on race day that we also experience the support of spectators. People who ring cow bells and hold signs that say things like ”Worst parade ever!” and ”Don’t stop now! People are watching!” A surprising number of spectators who come to cheer for friends or family members stay to cheer for thousands of random strangers. Most amazing of all are those who show up and cheer for hours, even though they don’t recognize a single runner in the race. The experience of camaraderie and community on marathon day is a testament to the wisdom of the African Proverb: “If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.”

As we prepare, together, for the long run, we can feel confident in our preparation. We have trained for this journey for the past one hundred and twenty five years. We have demonstrated the willingness to adapt and the drive to achieve our promise. We have exemplified grit and the perseverance necessary to attain our goals. We have proven that we have belief in our purpose and the value of our mission. And we have displayed the sense of community that will allow us to go far, together.

In the words of the great philosopher, Bruce Springsteen: “Baby, we were born to run.”