

## Provost Remarks: Fall Academic Affairs Address – Sept. 5, 2025

[SLIDE 1] Good afternoon colleagues, and welcome to the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Academic Affairs Address. It is a pleasure to welcome you. By way of brief process comment, I will begin with approximately 15ish minutes of overview context to this year, looking back first and then forward. Each of the Deans will then take about 12ish minutes to present from their college perspectives. Note that this year for my part, toward the latter half there will be a moment in which I invite you to respond in writing to two question prompts using the Q&A feature. So as we move toward that moment, I wanted you to know in advance so you can locate that feature, something for which I will provide explanation for what's being sought.

As you may recall, we began doing the Academic Affairs Fall Address as a stand alone activity Fall of 2022, the theme for that first year being *Building the Academic Affairs Future*. Among other topics, that theme took particular note of the importance of diversifying our student body to include more adult students in the mix – the biggest need in New Jersey. In 2023, the theme was *Momentum for Success* in which I used the metaphor of my recent climb and then steep descent of Mt. Whitney, the highest mountain in the lower 48, to speak to the importance of acceleration of our program and student success initiatives. Last year the theme was *Realizing the Academic Affairs Future*, one in which I read you a not so imaginary story called the *Tale of a Redhawk and a Bear*, one in which the Bear no longer felt second fiddle to the Redhawk down the road. This year's theme is *Looking to the Next Five Years* and is intended to expand on the President's introduction of the planned build this year of our next Strategic Plan, a five year one that will take us to 2030.

[SLIDE 2] Before we jump into the details of the theme, however, I want to acknowledge, as I have in the past, 4 groups within Academic Affairs, namely since last fall - new faculty and staff, retirees, faculty receiving tenure, and faculty receiving promotion to full professor. This year each Dean will speak to their faculty and staff while I will speak to staff that report up through an Associate Provost, as well as faculty in the library. First, in the College of Adult & Professional Studies we are pleased to welcome the following persons who support its continued growth – Megan Bratkovitch, WPO Advisor, Gema Mendoza & Martha Arevalo, financial aid counselors, and Sam Miller, Student Success & CPL Coordinator. In our Office of Community College & Dual Enrollment Partnerships we welcome Natalie Dickerson. Finally, in the Library, we are pleased to relay the achievement of tenure and promotion by Neil Grimes, Linda Salvesson, and David Williams. Thank you to all of these colleagues doing important work in support of the WP Mission.

[SLIDE 3] At this point, I now return to the theme of *Looking to the Next Five Years*. In order to look forward, however, it is important to first have a look back perspective. What I sought to do here is to create a singular slide that integrates particular data points essentially telling a pre- and a post-pandemic story. First, the pre- story. This one, unfortunately, is one that was not unlike many regional state universities. A slow downward slide that then accelerated during the pandemic. With the exception of the first year of WP Online that launched at the graduate level Fall 2020, key metrics all trended down. Any one of these were reason for alarm, particularly given our HSI and MSI status, and heavy reliance on traditional-aged students. But now compare those outcomes with the post-

pandemic ones. Frankly, all I can say is, wow. The successes reflected here took a village – faculty and staff both get the credit for doing what this Collin Powell quote articulates, focusing on the little matters that together fold up into big ones. Building the right student supports for both traditional-aged and adult students, adding the right new programs to the portfolio, revisioning current programs for downstream attraction and strength, student success goal setting and action taking at the department level, and teaching pedagogy innovations among others. Colleagues, this kind of performance change since the pandemic is frankly almost non-existent among regional state institutions and in scarce supply at any institutional type. We are far from perfect – there are many institutions with higher student retention and graduation rates than us, including among regional state universities, but relatively few can touch us in terms of the change over a four year period on these metrics as reflected here, especially at the graduate level and among adults, and nearly none have realized our growth in online education.

**[SLIDE 4]** With the previous slide as backdrop, it is now time to look to the next five years. As the president mentioned in his address, this will be the year in which we engage the development of a next strategic plan, one that will take us five years to 2030. To this point, the broad frames or focus areas are conceptualized, but what we feel should be prioritized to go into those frame areas is not, the President only offering possible examples in his remarks last week. I would argue, though, that any strategic plan is highly dependent on what it is that an organization or institution has uniquely, and that is hard for competitors to imitate, what is known as competitive advantage, and either leveraging what currently exists, or creating it in new forms. By way of a few examples, think of Apple. Its sleek product design, intuitive user experience, and tight integration of hardware, software, and services that were difficult to imitate and created a loyal customer base. Toyota's just-in-time production, continuous improvement culture, and relentless focus on quality control set the industry standard, and with lean operations. How about in higher education? Here are two examples. Arizona State University was a languishing university until about 15 years ago. They sought to blow up traditional organizational structures and instead organize around the challenges of society, and to emphasize partnerships (think Starbucks) and innovation as a brand identity. And of course there is Southern New Hampshire University – they found a way to reinvent via scalable online learning and unique student support services while continuing to keep their costs low. Imitating these companies and institutions is not easy, and hence one of the key reasons why they have been successful.

To begin the process of preparing you to share in the Q&A what you see as competitive advantages for William Paterson in some way, or that could be leveraged into competitive advantage, here are seven categories or types. *Cost Advantage* is being able to deliver a good or service at a lower price than others. Arguably we do that now with WP Online that is the lowest cost in New Jersey for online education and with a tuition we don't change for a student once enrolled, only for new students. *Differentiation Advantage* is to provide something unique and hard to imitate – some specialized academic programs might be an example or to emphasize not only “what” is unique but also “how” it is unique. *Focus Advantage* is when an institution has a particular niche emphasis – for example one that takes a brand focus around healthcare in some way, the fastest growing job market in the country. A *Speed Advantage* is being able to launch or pivot more quickly than others,

for example to integrate AI within and across curricula rapidly, or within administrative systems that enhance processes and services. *Innovation Advantage* is similar to what Arizona State leveraged – building a culture willing to blow up traditional structures and to hire entrepreneurial faculty and staff. *Geographic Advantage* is to be proximate to either large potential student populations or to have some other unique attraction to a locale. Rick Muma, President of Wichita State University, is receiving national attention right now for what they have leveraged around the aviation industry locally and their application of an innovation culture not unlike Arizona State. *Customer Service Advantage* emphasizes unique attention to the communities served. Our integration of Navigate as a tool for wrap around student support in the form of Success Teams could arguably be an example, as might be our Family & Parent Relations unit that seeks to integrate parents and families as active support networks for students. Finally, there is *Culture as Competitive Advantage*. The President referenced this in his remarks last week. Organizations that are highly bought into the mission, and that work collaboratively to advance important goals, including those that may transcend what may be the needs of an individual person or unit within the organization, can often be characterized as having a strong culture, unusually difficult to imitate. Organizations of this stripe typically have strong value sets that are transparently self-evident to outsiders – think Doctors Without Borders, Habitat for Humanity, and universities that are highly engaged with student experiential learning and community impact – think Appalachian State and Northeastern University.

OK, now it is your turn. I would like you to take a minute or so to reflect on these two questions and in light of what I have just shared. What is one competitive advantage you see for WP, or some unit or enterprise within WP, right now? And second, what do you see as a budding strength that could be leveraged into a bone fide competitive advantage, difficult for others to imitate? I'm going to let you go now for 2 minutes to do this exercise and type your answers into the Q&A, and then to reconvene you for a few additional remarks before turning things over to the Deans. No need to share your name, but if you want, OK too. Please do note which is question 1 and question 2 however. OK, go! [after 2 minute pause] OK, thank you for that. You can still upload if you want, but I am now going to turn to specific Academic Affairs priorities for 2025-26.

**[SLIDE 5]** Perhaps it is no surprise given what I have just shared, but a transcendent priority for the Division of Academic Affairs is the ongoing build and leverage of competitive advantage as it informs our next Strategic Plan. What you shared today, and that the staff in Academic Affairs shared some weeks ago at a divisional workshop, will be important building blocks. Beyond there, our goals as a Division remain resolute as they have since I arrived here and that align with the university's goals, namely enrollment, student success, resource generation, resource stewardship, and Investment in People. Let me now briefly take each in turn. In the enrollment arena, ongoing program expansion & current program learning outcome opportunities strategically aligned with external needs, particularly as linked to the health care industry, will be a priority. Hence, additional thinking around certificate opportunities aligned with industry and that students earn on route to a degree, accelerated program opportunities, the possibility of offering a narrowly focused 3-year degree, healthcare linked programs and learning outcomes, and curricula that thoughtfully considers both AI outcome needs, as well as AI ethical responsibilities, will be a focus. On this latter front, CIO Bartle and I met with the AI Taskforce of TAC and is actively moving to

advance recommendations in this space, including professional development for faculty. Our student success goals remain priorities, the ongoing partnership needs within and across Divisions being of particular importance, as is the Faculty as Mentor Initiative. In case you did not know, WP in 6 years has moved from a \$4 million grant enterprise to upwards of a \$14 million one. Under the resource generation goal, we want to leverage the indirect resources it has generated to aid faculty, and staff to engage in such opportunity who thus far have not or only minimally. With respect to resource stewardship, in addition to continued vigilance around course schedule management, the annual program vitality exercise will continue in importance and I thank, in advance, the departments and programs who are already attending to these needs identified this past Spring in my report to the Faculty Senate. Finally, in regard to investment in people, whereas it may be last in this list, I am really thinking of this at the top. The pandemic took a toll in resource allocation on this front, but as I said last year, something important for an institution to provide. Hence, while \$100,000 of travel funding was allocated last year, I plan to expand it to \$120,000. And, we have brought back ART this year already for new faculty but I wish to provide \$180,000 in ART that will get deployed in AY 2026-27 for all faculty, including as part of an application and review process this year for which the Faculty Senate is right now preparing recommendations on criteria.

**[SLIDE 6]** In closing, I leave you with this quote that I think appropriately sums up the role and purpose of a regional state university. “Regional public universities have a core mission of increasing access to higher education, particularly for students in their surrounding communities, and contributing to regional economic and social development. They achieve this by offering a range of academic programs, focusing on teaching and student success, and fostering strong ties with local businesses and communities.” Colleagues, that is a mission for which we can be proud, and have opportunity to do even better in coming years. Thank you for your attention and I now turn things to Dean Sharma from the College of Science & Health, with the other three Deans to follow before I do a final wrap up.

### **Provost Wrap Up Remarks**

Thank you Dean colleagues for your remarks and exciting reflections not only on the now, but on the future. And colleagues who have tuned in, I hope you found what was shared interesting and thought provoking. Finally, we will be posting the competitive advantage examples you shared on the Provost’s website along with this Powerpoint and remarks.