

## **Inaugural Address**

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Thank you all for this extraordinary honor and for the trust you have placed in me as we set forth on a path to soar together. I am humbled by the great people and the rich history that precede me; I am in admiration of each of you, our FDU family, who join me in serving this institution and I am committed with everything in my power to ensure a stronger and sustainable path for FDU.

Thank you to the Board of Trustees for your confidence and guidance. Thank you to our incredible faculty and devoted staff for your collaboration and support. Thank you to our extraordinary alumni whose success most vividly reflects the FDU story and the quality of what this institution offers. Thank you to our friends and supporters who believe in our mission, and to those joining us today from higher education institutions across our state and region. And thank you most of all to our incredible students whose light, whose hope and whose vast potential give us poignant reminders of why we do what we do.

I am proud to reflect on over half of my life indelibly linked to FDU, celebrating 20 years as a member of the faculty and in service as an administrator, and four transformational years here as an undergraduate student. These years also coincide with so much learning and personal transformation from all those whom I have been blessed to have as part of my journey. I arrived my first time on campus with my sister, who I am honored to have here today along with my brother-in-law, who taught me so many things, not the least of which was what to look for in embarking on my educational journey and who guided me in the decision toward selecting FDU for my four life-changing undergraduate years.

I returned to FDU in 2003, often sharing that this is the only job I've actually ever interviewed for. I made one demand, which was to have someone cover my classes while I got married the next month to my wife, Jill. We celebrate 20 years of marriage in a few weeks, and I have been blessed to learn so much about myself through her. She has taught me sacrifice, giving up her career and many of her dreams to raise our family, homeschool our children and be the anchor of our home. Every opportunity I have had, every dream I've pursued has been because of the knowledge and assurance that she was the rock of stability that would keep things going while I took on a new challenge. During my time here, I've had three children, all here today, including one who is herself embarking on her own FDU journey. I've watched them grow up on campus, and they have taught me so much about being better as I've watched them take on the challenges of life head on. I am blown away by their kindness, the grace in which they navigate challenges and the beautiful and unique spirits that they bring into the lives of those around them. They are the legacy in which I am most proud, and they continue to make me better every day.

So many others have taught me so much during my time here, from my mentors turned colleagues in the department of chemistry, to my colleague deans and fellow administrators along the way, to the many students who have continued to keep me young in spirit as I see the joy of learning and college through them. It is for you that we find joy each morning, arriving on campus with a hope to fill the lives of others for a better tomorrow.

There are many words that can be used to describe FDU, including innovative and resilient, but today I most want to emphasize what I think are the three pillars that define an FDU education, that crystallize our special legacy and that identify what we must use as our guideposts amidst the urgent change as we move forward. Since it was founded, FDU has provided an education and experience that, above all, is personal, global and transformational.

### **Personal**

For me, FDU was undoubtedly personal. I grew up in Staten Island and never dreamed of becoming a college president. As I considered college, I came in

thinking I was headed toward medical school ... and then somehow, one lost postcard later, I ended up registering last and got to choose from whatever courses were still open. I vividly recall freshman orientation, going through a course booklet with Associate Dean Betty Feeley, who patiently, knowledgeably and kindly walked me through my options and helped me plot my initial steps. That set the tone for me from day one, and at every twist in the road, I received continued personal support and attention from faculty and staff who truly cared about me.

The list of open courses that she helped me select from was short, but on the list was General Chemistry. Truthfully, I hated chemistry in high school, and begrudgingly signed up for it my first semester here. Five weeks into my first semester of freshman year, I was inspired by Frank Lang, professor of chemistry at Florham, who asked me to participate in a research project with him. I found my passion and never looked back.

FDU's personal approach has always been a part of our DNA, but the truth is that we can and must do even better for students who have different needs and challenges than ever before. This is why we have adopted the mantra of Students First, to constantly infuse each activity with the mindset that our students are our foremost and highest priority. To succeed and be true to our mission, our focus always has to be on the individual student as the center of all we do and every decision we make.

## **Global**

For me, FDU also was global. That may sound strange to say as I went from Staten Island to Florham Park, to Princeton and then back to Florham Park. But FDU brought the world to me and expanded my world beyond anything I had imagined. Certainly, my classrooms were mini-melting pots as I met people from across generations and around the world and became connected to ideas and individuals from across countries and cultures. But most importantly, I began to think of myself as a global citizen with responsibilities and considerations that did not end at borders. And I began to think of myself as someone who could extend his reach beyond any limitations and touch people's lives, paying it forward to others who can further make a difference throughout the world. The evidence of

that global reach is present today, as we are joined both here in New Jersey and on live stream from our campus communities in Vancouver, British Columbia and Wroxton, England.

Since our founding, Dr. Sammartino felt it vital to cultivate a global mindset. That was ahead of its time, and it remains a core of our identity. The need to prepare world citizens has never been greater. As we saw so vividly during recent years, the greatest challenges facing humanity do not stop at borders. At the same time, career opportunities span countries and cultures so our graduates must be ready to face the challenges and embrace the opportunities of our global society.

### **Transformational**

For me, finally, FDU was transformational. I came here with a certain perspective, with certain skills but with limitations. At the end of my four-year student journey, I was completely transformed. Who I was inside was also altered forever. I learned a great deal about others but learned immensely more about myself, about what I could do and what I could achieve and what I could contribute to my world.

I have been equally fortunate to experience this transformation during my 20 years here as a member of the faculty and in the many roles I've taken on. I've experienced it watching students arrive on campus unsure of themselves and their path forward, only to be walking across the stage at commencement on a path toward the future. But, I have also been transformed, listening to the stories of triumph over adversity that our students tell us about, watching the dedication of our faculty and staff in going the extra mile for our students, and being part of a culture and a community that brings out the best in all of us. I have said it since I set foot on campus 28 years ago ... there is something uniquely special about FDU, and I believe now what I did then ... our best days are yet to come.

### **Transforming Our Future**

Yet, here we are now in the midst of the most challenging time ever to befall our institution or the industry of higher education.

Colleges and universities are operating in a rapidly changing environment. Fewer students are applying to colleges and demographic realities indicate that number will drop more dramatically starting in 2025. There is a declining perception of the value of a college degree even as the evidence to the contrary grows stronger. And perhaps most significantly, there are radical changes in the way students live and learn and in the needs they have and support they require. What college was, what it is and what it can be hold three vastly different answers, and we must look to the future before we fall into a place of irrelevance.

Those institutions, including ours, who do not change, and who refuse to accept the need to meet students where they are and who refuse to honestly accept the reality of market forces and changing demand will not just struggle, they will disappear. Our industry can be among the most resistant to change. We cannot accept that way of thinking. We must embrace change if doing so benefits our students.

In the knowledge economy where information is at our fingertips, it is overdue that we change our mindset from simply being purveyors of knowledge and adapt to something much different. We need to move away from transmitting facts and toward a combination of offering knowledge, skills that are adaptable and transferrable, applied and experiential learning and the necessary support for whole-person development. The entire well-being of the individual needs to be cultivated on our campuses. This idea of being the sage on the stage has to be replaced by an immersive, supportive community that provides what students don't always find before coming to campus. That can mean anything and everything from emotional support to classroom instruction, to even a stable place to feel at home and find security. If you believe college students are the same now as they were even a few years ago, sit down and talk to one for a few minutes. The hopes, struggles, expectations and fears are eye-opening and so we must better address the needs of learners with a new approach.

Our campuses should be places that embrace failure on a road to success, that provide a safe home to be oneself and discover one's identity, and to be a place where growing up is encouraged inside a surrounding community that will be there to pick students up when they fall down. The greatest skills I've learned about

supporting our students, I've learned not from being an academic, but rather from being the supportive parent to my own children. Students must feel like they belong, like they are connected not just to an institution but to the people around them. They must be listened to, encouraged, respected and treated with empathy.

If we embrace our role as navigators, parental figures, coaches and mentors, we can and will create a supportive environment where students can thrive.

FDU has always been special because it has always been a place where students can find their place and their future regardless of their past circumstances. And that is I believe the type of place we all wish to be a part of.

### **The FDU of Tomorrow**

Since I started as interim president in January, I have talked and met with as many of you as possible, held town halls, and invited input from faculty, staff, alumni and students. I have also reviewed all the material provided by working groups focusing on different areas for the recent strategic planning process. I want to again thank everyone for your ideas and thoughts. The result of that process was our new strategic plan titled FDU Will Soar. The six strategic goals identified are: **Recruit** students, **Retain** our current students, **Graduate** all our students, **Partner** with institutions that can help us improve and enhance offerings, encourage more to **Give** to our fund-raising campaign for Students First and better **Position** and communicate our special traits and accomplishments. Each of these goals are vital and each of them needs to be constant focal points for our community.

We are starting the process of reimagining FDU by providing even greater personal support, by focusing on immersive learning opportunities that provide a competitive advantage, and evaluating all programs and services to see what can be done better. I am sure you are all tired of hearing me say we need to meet learners where they are. But what does that mean? It means focusing on every facet of the student experience and seeing the world through their eyes. It means supporting them in their academic, physical, social and emotional development. It means offering services that work for their schedules and circumstances. And it means

adapting when necessary to provide them the opportunity to overcome problems that may occur.

It is important that I share with each of you the reality of the task ahead. We must make significant changes to survive and thrive.

While this is a challenging time for higher education, I believe FDU will succeed for several reasons. First of all, our adaptability is a trait rooted strongly in our DNA. We have always evolved to meet the needs of students and we can do so once again. Second, we have a great track record of success serving diverse groups of students on and off campus, including pre-college students, first-time college students, lifelong learners and underserved populations. Our world needs institutions like FDU that have a proven track record of transforming lives, changing generational narratives and providing critical real-world training.

Most of all, though, I am confident in our future because of our people. That has always been and will continue to be our greatest strength. Through your commitment and collaboration we will change and lead the way to provide greater opportunities for a greater diversity of learners.

I ask you to join me in leaving a legacy. In the Broadway show Hamilton, there is a quote that resonates with me: “Legacy? What is a legacy. It is planting seeds in a garden that you don’t get to see.” As educators we are used to doing this, as for every thank you note that you receive from a student, there are hundreds of others whom you invest in and never know the role you played in shaping their future.

My ask today for each of you is that you commit yourselves to leaving this legacy, and to invest with me in building for a future that we don’t yet know, that we may not get to see, but that we know is of the utmost importance on a path toward a sustainable future. As an institution, we have defined our North Star. The path forward means focusing people and resources on those programs and priorities that best serve students. Tough decisions must be made if we are to position ourselves for the future.

We need to focus on the things we can further develop with excellence. In a world where resources are scarce, we must carefully consider who we serve and align our offerings so those we serve have the support and services they need. This will be challenging in the short term, but it will set us up for long-term stability and prosperity.

I wish I could tell you with certainty the next steps, but much of our future will not be defined by me alone or by a few people, but rather by a combination of our students, partners and stakeholders and community. My commitment to you is that we will be open and transparent in our communications and we will be focused on assuring the preservation of our student-centered mission and our core values.

### **Conclusion**

As we look ahead, I want to harken back to the wisdom of our founder who said It was never just about spaces or buildings or having unlimited resources. As Peter Sammartino described, the key ingredient was an enduring spirit of service to students and to each other. That spirit of service has been on great display this week as our students, faculty and staff joined hands in days of service to our communities. As Dr. Sammartino also wrote, “If there isn’t an underlying feeling of idealism, of service and companionship, then everything else is of no avail.”

Another one of my favorite quotes is about the importance of an absolute and unfailing commitment and it seems particularly resonant for today. It is Walt Disney who said, “When you believe in a thing, believe in it all the way, implicitly and unquestionable.”

I deeply believe in this University, this community and our purpose, and I know you do too. But it takes more than belief, it takes sweat and persistence. When asked about the secret to success, Disney also said, “You achieve success by working. And you keep working until the job is done and done right.” I look forward to working alongside each and every one of you, and I promise and pledge with every fiber of my being to do exactly that for this institution, for each member of this community and for our students. And I know you will join me because I know this community well and, since becoming president, I have only gained a



greater appreciation for your talent, your resolve and your commitment. In the unity of our community lies our strength. And through our devoted service to our students, FDU can continue to forge an impactful presence in higher education so our graduates will continue to transform their lives and the world around them.

As I felt 28 years ago when setting foot on campus, I still believe today: Our best days lie ahead, and I look forward to embarking upon them with each of you on the path forward.