



**BALL STATE  
UNIVERSITY**

Office of the President

**GEOFFREY S. MEARNES  
FALL CONVOCATION  
EMENS AUDITORIUM  
AUGUST 20, 2021  
9:00 A.M.**

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

It's great to see so many of you in person.

Susana, thank you for your commitment to our mission.

Earlier this year, Susana published an essay about leadership. In her essay, she reflected on how leaders must continue to foster an inclusive and equitable work culture, even during a crisis like a pandemic. Susana, we are fortunate to have you as our Provost.

To this year's award recipients, congratulations. Your contributions to our University are impressive—and enduring. Let's take another moment to express our appreciation—and our admiration—to our colleagues.

In her introductory remarks, the Provost welcomed our newest faculty members as well as our newest dean, Dr. Scott Rutledge. Scott, welcome.

I also want to welcome the newest member of our Board of Trustees.

Amy Wyse is a junior who is majoring in international business, economics, and Spanish. Amy, I look forward to working with you.

To all of you here in Emens Auditorium and to all of you watching the live stream, welcome—and welcome back.

Some of you have only recently returned to campus.

For you—perhaps for all of you—I suspect that you may be a bit anxious. One day, this pandemic will end. Like you, I look forward to that day with great anticipation—and with some impatience.

But this challenge has demonstrated our capacity to be creative and innovative. To be patient and persistent. To be prudent and courageous.

This year, I begin my fifth academic year as the president of Ball State University. Today—and every day—it is an honor to serve you.

The first time I stood before you on this stage, I spoke about how our University was strong and getting stronger.

On that day in August 2017, I could not have predicted that a novel coronavirus would bring the world to a halt, upending our lives. And yet, these past 16 months have demonstrated our extraordinary capacity to excel in spite of these historic challenges.

The scope of your efforts and your achievements can be measured and quantified in many ways.

“Transatlantic Storytelling” is a feature-length documentary produced by students in our Sports Link program and their partners at Cardiff Metropolitan University. This documentary was filmed in Wales over 12 days in February and March of 2020, and it earned three international awards this Spring, including the highest honor—a platinum award—at the 2021 International MUSE Awards.

U.S. News & World Report ranked our program in information and communication sciences 21<sup>st</sup> in the nation for Best Online Master’s program in Computer Information Technology.

And last month, The Wall Street Journal published national rankings based on an analysis of the incomes graduates earned compared to the debt they accumulated to earn their degrees. This same program ranked first in value among similar graduate programs offered at colleges and universities across the country.

Another point of pride for the College of Communication, Information, and Media is the continued success of our speech and debate teams. The speech team won its 11th consecutive state tournament and placed 11th at the National Speech Championship. The debate team placed first in Indiana and third at the National Education Debate Association Tournament.

In our College of Fine Arts, our animation and visual communication programs were recognized again for their excellence in national rankings. And Professor Shantanu Suman was named by Graphic Design USA as one of the publication’s “People to Watch.”

Our student ensemble, “Beneficence Woodwind Quintet,” won first prize at the Charleston International Music Competition.

And for the 10th consecutive year, graduates of our theatre education program—the second largest in the nation—achieved 100% job placement.

Architecture students from our College of Architecture and Planning placed third in an international solar decathlon design competition, while a team of

students in our construction management program placed fifth in a national competition sponsored by the Mechanical Contractors Association of America.

This year, our Center for Professional Selling in the Miller College of Business earned its own national ranking. The program, which prepares our graduates for careers in sales and sales management, ranked fifth in Study.com's list of Best Bachelor's Degrees in Sales.

Last Fall, New Mobility magazine named our University one of the top 10 "wheelchair friendly colleges" in the country. The magazine highlighted our wheel-chair friendly infrastructure, our percentage of accessible buildings, and our accessible housing options. The magazine also recognized our personal assistance programs, our adaptive sports and recreation opportunities, our accessible on-campus transportation, and our adaptive computer labs.

Earlier, I mentioned the success of our nationally ranked CICS program.

This Spring, Cyrus Green, a graduate student in the program, became the first student in our University's history to receive a David L. Boren Fellowship. The fellowship will allow Cyrus, who is fluent in Spanish, French, and Farsi, to study Persian in Tajikistan.

While the pandemic changed the course for this year's study abroad opportunities, I am proud that our students and graduates received several major national and international awards. Six students received Benjamin Gilman International Scholarships, and three students were awarded fully funded Fulbright scholarships to teach in Europe.

Many of you are aware of the success our student-athletes had on the field this past year, but what makes me particularly proud is their academic performance.

In Fall 2020, across all sports programs, our student-athletes earned a median GPA of 3.35. And in Spring 2021, they achieved a median cumulative GPA of 3.37. Both are the best academic performances in our history.

Our colleagues from Student Athlete Support Services also worked to make our CARDS Mentoring Program nationally certified. This mentoring program is now just one of 170 such programs nationwide—and the only one in the state and in the MAC—to achieve this distinction.

I also just learned that Chris Adams, a member of our men's tennis team who graduated summa cum laude from the Honors College in May, has earned the Bob James Memorial Award. This award is given each year to only one male and one female athlete from the MAC who achieves a minimum 3.5 GPA and displays good character, leadership, and citizenship.

Chris also received a NCAA Postgraduate Scholarship, and he plans to apply both scholarships to attend law school.

I've just spoken about several impressive rankings and recognitions that we have achieved over the past year. But permit me to share one more—the most important statistic.

Since the advent of the pandemic in March 2020, we have enabled and empowered more than 10,000 students to earn their degree at our University.

This remarkable feat was made possible because of the hard work and dedication of our faculty and staff. Every day, you commit to our students. And every day, your commitment is the reason we are able to fulfill our vital mission.

I am especially grateful to those of you who continued to implement the key strategic imperatives in our strategic plan. Even as you continue to adapt to the disruptions caused by the pandemic, you are enabling us to build a brighter future.

Last academic year, more than 1,600 students participated in 127 immersive learning projects offered in 25 academic departments. This participation is consistent with the annual number of students who completed immersive learning projects in previous academic years—a remarkable feat given the need for us to reshape our approach to “hands-on” learning during a “hands-off” pandemic.

I am particularly grateful to more than 40 faculty members who participated in the inaugural year of our Teacher-Scholar program. This program enables undergraduate students to collaborate with research mentors in all seven of our colleges. These faculty mentors help our students complete high-impact work that sets them apart as graduates of our University.

I am also grateful to our academic advisors who help our students choose the academic path that best prepares them for academic success—and a fulfilling career.

Last year, our freshman advisors assisted a record number of students during the first week of Fall and Spring classes. Last Fall, approximately 88 percent of our freshmen visited the Freshman Advising Center. That's extraordinary, given the necessary changes that were happening at that time.

Our advisors play an integral role in supporting student success. I am grateful for the trust and rapport they built with our students in a year that was unsettling for all of us.

This past year, our Division of Online and Strategic Learning launched three new graduate degrees and one graduate certificate. These new programs align with Goal 2 of our strategic plan—a goal that reflects our commitment to graduate education and lifetime learning.

Initial enrollment in a new graduate program in data science in the College of Sciences and Humanities exceeded our projections. Our colleagues expected 15 students to enroll, but 35 students registered. This Fall, the college will launch an undergraduate companion, a bachelor of science in data analytics, with three concentration areas spread across 10 departments.

The College of Architecture and Planning now offers a graduate certificate in high performance building design.

And students enrolled in our nationally ranked online MBA program have new cross-disciplinary concentrations to choose from—including artificial intelligence and healthcare administration.

These are just a few examples of the progress we are making to implement some of the key imperatives of our strategic plan.

But now I want to talk about another strategic imperative that is also important to me. In fact, it's personal.

Earlier this year, I sent an email updating you about the specific steps we have taken to support our inclusive excellence work.

We've made good progress, but there is more work to do.

On October 23, the Saturday of Homecoming weekend, we will have a ribbon-cutting ceremony for our new Multicultural Center. As you may recall, this facility was formerly located in a small white house on the southern boundary of our campus on McKinley Avenue.

The new Multicultural Center is now located in the heart of our campus.

Because that's where this facility belongs—in the heart of our campus. Because this work is at the heart of all that we do.

Over the past year, we expedited the implementation of our Inclusive Excellence Plan, which I first shared with all of you in January 2020. We conducted an audit of our bias incident reporting system, we completed unit-level inclusive excellence plans for all colleges and divisions, and we created our Cardinal Student Leaders Advisory Council.

In recent years, we've also made progress in enhancing the diversity of our campus. But our ultimate goal is to be truly inclusive. To further this work, the Office of Inclusive Excellence is launching our "We Soar" campus climate campaign, which will include a campus climate survey next Spring.

Our inclusive excellence work embodies our commitment to a future where every person is welcome and respected.

All across campus, we are working to implement strategic initiatives that represent more steps along our journey to a bright future.

This past Spring, we launched our new Esports program. This program, and a new facility, will help us achieve our goal of enhancing academic offerings by bringing Esports experiences into the curriculum across multiple disciplines.

As CCIM adopts this new digital sport, another college is preserving the future of the humanities.

As many of you know, I was an English major. Now, it's been a few years since I earned my undergraduate degree, but I still believe that the humanities are essential to a college education. I believe this.

In 2019, our colleagues in the College of Sciences and Humanities created COMPASS Advantage. This program is our signature initiative dedicated to improving the post-graduation success rates of our humanities students.

One graduate from the program described it this way: “COMPASS Advantage helps you find career direction and gets you in a healthy professional mindset. With an alumni speaker series, resume workshops, and introvert-friendly networking tips, it’s a gentle push to do the things you know you need to do.”

Since the program was launched two years ago, approximately 300 of our graduates who earned degrees in the humanities have signed up to mentor students in the program.

COMPASS Advantage now spans the college, with the anthropology department joining other participating departments, including English, history, modern languages and classics, and philosophy and religious studies.

This past year, COMPASS Advantage also launched a website, which has become an important tool in fostering strategic connections with alumni and potential donors.

Speaking of donors, this past year, Teachers College received a \$1.45 million gift—the largest gift in the college’s history. This extraordinary philanthropic investment will have a significant impact on our ability to increase diversity among the state’s teachers.

Michelle Ryan, a TC graduate, and her husband, Jim, established a scholarship in the family’s name. They also funded the new Ryan Family Navigators Program. These scholarships will provide financial support for incoming students with diverse and economically challenged backgrounds who aspire to become educators. And through the Navigators Program, these same students and their classmates will have champions in the college to help them pursue academic excellence, to discover our undergraduate programs and services, and to foster lasting connections with one another.

This gift is enhancing our existing programs.

For example, at our July Commencement, I watched five African American women and men receive their doctoral degrees from Teachers College.

One of those graduates was Dr. John Anderson, who is here with us today. Dr. Anderson, please stand so we can acknowledge you.

Dr. Anderson, I also wish you good luck, as I understand you have been selected as the first person to lead our new Ryan Family Navigators Program. I look forward to witnessing the transformative impact that you will have on our inaugural class of “Ryan Scholars.”

The Ryans were not the only generous donors last year. In fact, last year, our generous alumni and benefactors contributed more than \$36 million in new gift commitments to our University.

That's the third consecutive year in which we received more than \$30 million in new gift commitments. Prior to the past three years, we had never received more than \$30 million in two consecutive years.

And the reason they are willing to make these extraordinarily generous gifts is because of their confidence in you. They know that their investments in our people—our faculty, our staff, and our students—they know that their investments are enabling us to transform lives—to have an enduring impact on people.

And it's not just our friends and our benefactors investing in our University—it's all of you as well.

During our most recent One Ball State Day, we raised \$905,000—our best single day of fundraising ever. This figure is impressive.

But what's even more impressive is that we've had year-over-year increases in the number of alumni, students, parents, and employees contributing to our University on this day. The 10,100 gifts we received on April 6 represent a 59% percent increase over the number we received in 2020—and a 144% percent increase over the number of gifts we received in 2019.

We also saw more engagement and participation from our faculty and staff. This year, more than 100 employees served as ambassadors, and every one of our deans, coaches, and Cabinet members participated financially as well.

This fundraising success is the product of a collective effort of the entire extended University community—our students, faculty, staff, graduates and friends. I am grateful to all who contributed to this achievement.

I am also grateful to our colleagues from the Foundation who, year after year, help us generate this support. They're now preparing for the public launch of our next capital campaign—a campaign that is vital to the future success of our students and our University.

I've just spoken about how our success is quantifiable and how we continue to advance programs and initiatives that are vital to our University.

Now I want to talk about the bright future that awaits our graduates—a bright future that, on a Spring evening just a few short months ago, appeared right before our very eyes.

Over two weekends in May, we held seven separate outdoor Commencement ceremonies to safely accommodate our Spring 2021 graduates and the members of the Class of 2020. These women and men were able to walk across the stage at Scheumann Stadium to accept their degrees. These ceremonies were special because, for so many months, we weren't sure they would be possible.

It was the first time in our history that we held commencement exercises at the stadium. And as we prepared for the first ceremony on Friday evening, I was anxious as dark clouds rolled in.

After hearing that thunderstorms were approaching the stadium, I decided to delay the start of the ceremony. Then I watched as graduates and their families calmly headed back to their cars to wait out the rain that began pouring down.

For a moment, I wondered whether we would be able to have the ceremony. But then, as the storm passed, we saw the most spectacular rainbow stretch across the evening sky—followed by a second rainbow right above it!

One of our photographers, Samantha Blankenship, captured this memorable moment with her camera.

Sam’s image became the year’s most liked and most shared photo across all our social media platforms. And for good reason:

Because rainbows represent hope—the promise of better, brighter days.

After the disappointments and the losses we had endured because of the pandemic, these rainbows inspired a renewed sense of optimism—and gratitude.

There are many people who made these Commencement ceremonies possible. But there is one person who deserves special recognition: Angel Tuttle.

In the weeks leading up to these ceremonies, Angel answered countless calls and responded to hundreds of emails. Her to-do list covered everything from how many water bottles we needed on the field for our graduates to how many training booklets we needed to distribute to our volunteers.

When one of our graduates arrived the morning of her ceremony without proper footwear, Angel ran to her own car, retrieved a pair of running shoes, and offered her shoes to the young woman so she could still walk across the field.

Angel, please stand so we can acknowledge your contributions to helping us resume this time-honored tradition.

I am grateful to Angel, to Stephanie Arrington, and to everyone who made Commencement such a memorable occasion.

After the ceremonies, I heard from several graduates who wanted us to know that the care you demonstrated on their behalf did not go unnoticed.

In the words of Kinsey Reese, one of these graduates: “It was the perfect ending to a long, challenging school year.”

It is your collective willingness to support our students—that’s the reason our campus community is distinct. That’s the reason our University is truly special.

Permit me to share a few more examples of what I mean.

In Spring 2020, before campus operations shut down as a result of the pandemic, a student brought his broken laptop in to our Technology HelpDesk. The laptop was uniquely configured to support the needs of this student, who was visually impaired.

But our colleagues in IT couldn’t fix the computer without ordering a new part. They sent the laptop home with the student. And, unfortunately, by the time the new part arrived, we had switched to online instruction.



With the pandemic underway, this student had no way to return his laptop to the HelpDesk for the necessary repair.

It was his final semester before he graduated. He couldn't complete his coursework without his computer. And now, he was facing an unforeseen challenge that might prevent him from earning his degree.

That's when Ben Armstrong, a member of our Unified Technology Support Staff, stepped up.

Ben drove to this student's house and brought the laptop to our repair shop. Ben fixed the computer. Then he drove it back to the student. Because he was willing to do more than what was expected of him, Ben made it possible for this student to continue with his coursework—and to graduate on time. Thank you, Ben.

As the COVID crisis continued into this past academic year, many students were directly impacted. Some of them experienced critical needs.

One of these students confided to his urban planning professors that he might have to drop out of the program. He was struggling financially. He wasn't sure where his next meal would come from.

Within hours, Scott Truex, the chair of the urban planning department, and Christine Rhine, the department's administrative coordinator, pooled together enough of their own money to buy groceries for this student, which Christine hand-delivered to the student's doorstep. Scott then contacted a local church, whose members donated \$1,000 toward the student's bills.

Another colleague from the college provided grant assistance so the student could purchase a new laptop. And our Financial Aid office provided a \$1,000 scholarship to help cover the student's short-term expenses so he could stay in school.

The kindness of our colleagues is impressive—and it had a great impact.

This student is now one course away from finishing his bachelor's degree.

As I said, this story is impressive. But at our University, that commitment is not exceptional. Indeed, as I have come to appreciate, these acts of service and kindness are representative of the culture that permeates our campus.

For example, there is Lieutenant Terrell Smith.

For more than 30 years, Terrell has served us as a member of our University Police Department. He always has a warm smile and a quick wit. Terrell is beloved by many of our colleagues, many of our students, and many more of our graduates.

On Tuesday, the University held a retirement party for Terrell.

Terrell could have ended his career that day.

But instead, Terrell chose to return to campus for a few more days just so he could participate in one of his favorite traditions: helping our students move into their residence halls.

That's just the kind of person he is—someone so inspired by our mission that he postponed his retirement so he could lend a helping hand to our students.

Terrell, today is your last day as an employee of Ball State University. And today also happens to be your birthday. Please stand so that we can recognize your extraordinary service to our University.

Terrell, my friend, I will miss being able to dunk you for a good cause. I wish you good health and great joy in the years to come.

Terrell is one of more than 2,000 staff and service employees whose work outside of the classroom made our University excel this past year.

As I do every year, I want to thank the women and men who maintain our grounds. For those of us who worked on campus throughout the pandemic, the sight of beautiful flowers created a sense of normalcy at a time when so much else felt unfamiliar.

I also want to extend my gratitude to the members of our custodial staff. Throughout the pandemic, these women and men continued taking care of our buildings. And every day throughout the pandemic, they sanitized all 180 of our general-purpose classrooms, 11 residence halls, and every corridor, stairwell, elevator, and restroom on our campus.

Although it is a big lift, our custodial staff will continue to sanitize our buildings this year.

Many of our custodians are hard at work this morning, fulfilling their duties as we open up our residence halls and dining facilities to students. But I invited a representative group of our colleagues to join us.

Because I wanted them to hear in person how grateful I am—how grateful we all are—for the work that they do to keep us safe.

To our custodial supervisors and staff, what you do for all of us, every day, deserves our deepest appreciation. If you are a member of this group and you are here, please stand so we can acknowledge you.

I also want to acknowledge our architects and construction managers. Before and during this pandemic, they have worked closely with contractors to continue and complete approximately \$400 million of major facilities projects across campus.

This work has resulted in the completion of many projects, including the North and the North West residence halls, our North Dining facility, our Multicultural Center, our Foundational Sciences Building, the Scheumann Indoor Practice Facility, our new parking structure on New York Avenue, and the demolition of LaFollette Hall and the Emens parking structure.

That is an impressive list of projects—a list that represents the largest concentrated period of construction in our history. These new facilities are a visible

representation of the physical growth and transformation that is fueling our future success. It's a tangible sign of our bright future.

But to me, the real foundation of our bright future is our continued commitment to the enduring values of our University.

As I prepared my remarks for today, I was struck by how the pandemic created an opportunity for us to demonstrate these values in new and unforeseen ways.

As you know, one of our enduring values is innovation.

I suspect that COVID-19 made all of your jobs harder. But many of you harnessed this unprecedented moment to better serve our students, our community, our state, and our country.

Through the lessons they learned during the Fall 2020 semester, Chris Bolender and Brian Moore taught an online class this past Spring that required theater and dance students to examine the equipment, technology, and theory behind live-streamed events. Our students then applied their new skills to help stage the department's line-up of virtual productions this past Spring.

Dorice Hankemeier, an associate professor of athletic training, partnered with faculty from the University of Indianapolis to create an online clinic for seven of the state's collegiate athletic training programs. Dorice helped create multiple virtual standardized patient cases that were vital to addressing the clinical educational needs of our students.

Dorice's innovative work demonstrates how, in times of crisis, our faculty commit to being creative, responsive, and progressive.

Then there is Chris Davidson, an associate professor of computer science from CICS.

Chris and a team from UC Irvine designed a new software for TIPPERS, an early warning system for COVID-19 that could revolutionize our country's battle against future pandemics.

Chris continues to test this new system, which allows users to track COVID-19 hot spots from their phones and to receive text alerts if they are in the vicinity of an infected person. Chris's work is also being tested by the U.S. Navy.

Over the past year and a half, many of you have demonstrated your abiding commitment to our enduring value of social responsibility. Your actions throughout this pandemic signified how, together, you've chosen to act on behalf of our society at large.

From sewing almost 8,000 masks for the campus and local communities to helping administer COVID-19 tests to making the vaccine more accessible and available, you've made a difference in helping mitigate the spread of this virus.

Since March 2020, I have sent many emails in which I have expressed my appreciation for all that you have done. Today, let me tell all of you again—face to face—how grateful I am for your contributions.

Thank you, Cesar Cruz, for converting one of your courses into three separate, smaller sections—adding precious hours of contact time to your already full work week—so that our architecture students could remain safe while benefitting from you teaching your in-person and your online classes simultaneously.

Thank you, Lina Burkhart, for the time and effort you gave to training our students to effectively and ethically deliver much-needed remote counseling sessions to members of our community.

Thank you, Jeff Seitz, for using your technical expertise to put hundreds of concerts online so that friends and family members could see and hear our students perform safely.

There are too many names, and not enough time, for me to thank each one of you. But please know that everything you have done—everything you continue to do—is appreciated.

I have said it multiple times before and today I must say it again:

You make me proud to serve as your President. Proud—and very grateful.

You may recall the video message I sent in May, encouraging you to take time to reflect on your feelings about the pandemic. The video that I shared with you was one way for me to process this historic experience.

I will share my video with University Libraries as my contribution to their COVID-19 Pandemic Project, a project for which they are asking members of the campus and local communities to share memories of their own experiences during this pandemic.

Years from now, historians combing through these materials will come to understand how we endured—and how we emerged from this pandemic. They will learn about all the ways we came together for the good of our community, even though, for so long, we were forced to remain apart.

Now, as we anticipate a future after this public health crisis, we can be proud for navigating through the hardships of this moment. In so many respects, both quantifiably and intangibly, we have excelled.

But when the pandemic finally recedes, we know that there will be more challenges ahead.

For example, it will continue to be difficult to compete with other institutions to enroll students, because there will be fewer high school graduates in the Midwest—and because, unfortunately, a smaller percentage of them are choosing to go to college.

I also anticipate that we will have to work harder to persuade our elected officials to invest in public higher education, because an increasing number of them are skeptical about the value and culture of higher education.

I am confident that we are prepared to meet and overcome these challenges.

In fact, because of the fundamental strength of our institution and because of our recent accomplishments, I believe these challenges represent another historic opportunity for us.

We will successfully confront these challenges because we have a long-term strategic plan—a plan that we began implementing before the pandemic began.

Because of a legacy of fiscal discipline and an infusion of federal relief funds, we also have substantial one-time resources to invest in the strategic imperatives articulated in this plan.

Perhaps most importantly, I am confident that we will succeed because we have gone through this defining moment together—because we have gained new resilience that gives us even greater strength to overcome the challenges that await us.

A couple years ago, I arranged a series of conversations with each division and each academic college. Later this year, as conditions permit, I will once again visit with you to discuss some of these challenges—and to listen to your suggestions. The Provost will join me when I visit the colleges.

I want to meet with you in person, because that's where genuine dialogue can occur.

Indeed, for the same reason, the work that lies ahead cannot happen without us being back on our campus—in classrooms and common spaces, interacting with our students.

We need to be here to demonstrate to our students how vital our work is both for them and for us.

Last Fall, when the Board approved our plan to resume face-to-face instruction, I heard stories from students and their families about the impact of that decision. One of those messages came from Chad Phillips, the parent of a freshman enrolled in our Sports Link program.

Shortly after classes began, Chad received a text from his son, Collin. Collin's text read:

“A long, cold day but”—and the following words Collin typed in all caps—“I LOVE IT. This is what I was meant to do and why I'm here. Thank you for your love and support.”

Chad wrote in his email that this text from Collin was everything a parent could hope to hear from their child after the child leaves for college.

Chad wrote, “My heart is filled today.”

Chad continued: “These kids missed prom, graduation, and so many experiences. I don’t know if you realize this or not, but this class is made up of 9/11 babies. They are a small cohort, because many were not willing to bring kids into the world at that scary time. So, we are an optimistic and determined group of parents, for sure. And we are thankful that you went forward with a school year.”

I received another email, this one from Gary Shadoin [SHA-DO-EEN], a Muncie resident. Gary wanted to thank Greg Ellcessor and his students who are training to be audiologists. While reading Gary’s email, I stopped counting at 31 exclamation points, which should give you some idea of the extent of his effusive praise for Greg and his students.

Eighteen years ago, Gary lost hearing in his right ear due to a massive brain tumor. It took him months to recover from his cancer, but he survived. For years, an undiagnosed issue with the ear canal in his left ear made it impossible for him to use hearing aids.

Last year, Gary found a medication to address this issue, and he was referred to our audiology department for testing. Gary wanted me to know that, with help from our colleagues, he was thrilled to have purchased a high-tech hearing system that allowed him, for the first time in years, to hear from both of his ears.

He wrote:

“I just wanted you to know about this life-enhancing experience from your Ball State University, President Mearns!!! Every time you pass by this brand-new facility ... Feel Good!! There are some wonderful people inside!! Enhancing lives in many ways! I will continue to be a regular client of them to stay updated, dialed in, and monitored for the best hearing I can have in my life!!!”

Gary’s experience in our audiology clinic demonstrates that, while there are many benefits to our agility in moving certain classes and community services online, there are some vital experiences that we can never replicate over Zoom.

I want to tell you about one more message I received, this one from a student, Lauren Latham.

Last Fall, Lauren wrote me a long email about the struggles she had been experiencing having to quarantine after her exposure to someone infected with COVID-19.

Lauren told me how that week had been one of the hardest of her life. With virtually no schedule, and no in-person interactions with friends, faculty, or co-workers, she was struggling to complete her online courses.

In her email, Lauren recognized that we would need to enforce stricter policies to mitigate the spread of the virus. But she urged me to continue allowing in-person classes to sustain her mental health and the mental well-being of other students.

She wrote: “As students we want to learn. As people, we want to grow ... In-person interactions—with masks and distance—are crucial to our experience at Ball State.”

Lauren has joined us this morning as my special guest. Lauren, please stand so we can acknowledge you.

Lauren’s email is a powerful reminder of our need to provide students with in-person instruction—with experiences that they can only have if they are here with their classmates—and with all of you—on our campus.

These opportunities provide them with responsibilities not just to a class or to a job. But with the responsibility to serve and support other people—a roommate, a classmate, or a community partner.

These opportunities are what give our students the chance to learn that a career is fulfilling when you serve others.

And these opportunities empower them to lead meaningful lives.

So, as classes begin on Monday, please remember that every moment you are given to interact face-to-face with one of our students is an opportunity—it’s a gift.

Please know that your engagement will change their lives—will change their lives for the better.

As I conclude my remarks to you today, I want to tell you one more story.

This story is about one of our young graduates, Ashley Ford.

Many of you may remember that I invited Ashley to serve as our Commencement speaker in December 2018—a Commencement ceremony during which she, herself, received her bachelor’s degree.

At the time, Ashley was writing her memoir, *Somebody’s Daughter*, which was published this June by FlatIron Books under the imprint, An Oprah Book. Two weeks after its debut, the book was on the New York Times Bestsellers list. Not bad for a young Ball State graduate.

A few months ago, I invited Ashley to return to campus as a writer-in-residence. She accepted my invitation. This Fall, Ashley will share her work with students and faculty, and she will engage with our campus and local communities. On October 7, she will sit down with me for a conversation in Sursa Hall.

In preparing for her upcoming visit, I read Ashley’s book. It explores her life coming of age in Fort Wayne with a single mother and a father who was in prison.

There was a scene about mid-way through her book that resonated with me. It reminded that, every year, we welcome to our University hundreds of prospective students just like Ashley—students for whom this campus is not just the brick-and-mortar institution we see every day. For many of these students, our campus is more like a distant dream—a dream that just might come true.

Ashley wrote about what it was like as a high school student to sneak out, without her mother's permission, to join one of her classmates for her first visit to our University.

She described how they arrived on campus "just as the sun was setting on the Bell Tower."

She wrote that the whole scene "felt enchanted ... like the opening scene of a teen rom-com."

That evening, Ashley hung out with her friends in one of our residence halls, and then they all drove to The Village to eat pizza at Greek's.

She wrote, "Our stay wasn't more than a few hours, but to me, the whole place was out of a storybook, quaint and magnificent."

Quaint and magnificent.

How fortunate are we, every day, to come to this beautiful campus.

A campus that, to Ashley—and to so many of our aspiring students—is a beacon drawing them to a bright future.

A place that tugs on their heart strings, whispering to them that this is where they are meant to be.

Last Spring, our colleagues from Admissions asked our future Cardinals to share why they chose to come to our University. There were many different responses, but one word kept surfacing in their responses.

One student wrote, "When I came for a tour, it felt like home, and I could see myself there."

The mother of another prospective student wrote, "To her, Ball State felt like home the minute we walked on campus ... I knew before she left she'd found her happy place."

Another student wrote: "At my visit, BSU immediately felt like home."

These affirmations demonstrate the intangible essence of what a Ball State experience can be for our students.

We can be the reason our students know, deep in their hearts, that there is no better place for them. This is it. They belong here.

Earlier, I told you about Lauren Lathem. I described how she ended her email to me, inviting me to consider her perspective that in-person instruction was both vital and necessary.

But I didn't tell you about how Lauren's email began.

In the first paragraph, Lauren wrote: "I have learned more here at Ball State than I ever had in my 18 years back home."

She wrote, "This is my second year at Ball State University, and I call this place my home."

To our newest colleagues, welcome.

To you veterans, welcome back.



And to all of you and to all of our students, welcome home.

In keeping with a tradition I started a few years ago, I have decided to conclude today's program with a musical performance.

As you know, I've developed the habit of calling Bill Jenkins and asking him to arrange for his students and graduates to sing for us.

This year, Bill—again—kindly listened to the reasons why I thought a particular artist's song was the perfect choice.

A few days later, Bill called me back. And as is his custom, he told me that he and Michael Rafter had a different idea.

Bill didn't use these words, but what I heard him say was, "Why don't you stick to your day job!"

Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome to the screen and to the stage a talented group of theatre students and graduates who have written the lyrics for the medley you are about to hear.