



**BALL STATE
UNIVERSITY**

Office of the President

**GEOFFREY S. MEARNS
FALL CONVOCATION
EMENS AUDITORIUM
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9:00 A.M.**

Thank you, Dr. Marri.

Good morning, everyone.

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

In his remarks, the provost welcomed our newest faculty members and the newest members of our leadership team.

I'd like to introduce a few other special guests.

Aiden Davis, our student trustee, is here with us this morning. Thank you for your service and your support.

I also want to recognize the members of our Foundation Board of Directors and our Alumni Council. Whether you are in the audience, or watching via livestream, thank you for your service and your support.

I also want to express my appreciation to my wife, Jennifer. She is a constant source of guidance, support, and strength for me. Thank you.

And to all of you. Thank you for joining me this morning.

In May, our Board of Trustees decided to extend my service as president through June 2029. I am grateful to the trustees for their confidence. And as I begin my tenth academic year, I am grateful for the opportunity to continue to serve you.

I embraced this opportunity because I continue to find serving you to be so meaningful and so fulfilling. I am grateful to all of you—and to all of your colleagues—for this opportunity.

Once again this morning, I will talk about how our University continues to fulfill our mission. This impact is driven by your sustained commitment.

I will also acknowledge some of the challenges.

But for nine years, irrespective of the challenge, you have tackled these challenges with courage and with confidence. Your discipline and your determination ensure that we will maintain momentum on our strategic flight path, no matter the turbulence that may lie ahead.

That is why I am so proud to serve you as the president of Ball State University.

On Monday, the academic year begins with an incoming freshmen class of more than 3,745 students. The average size of our freshman class over the last four years is comparable to—in fact, it’s even slightly larger than our pre-pandemic, ten-year average.

This year’s incoming freshmen are also well prepared. The average high school GPA is 3.55. Approximately 30 percent are first-generation and 40 percent are eligible for federal Pell grants. More than 90 percent of our freshmen come from Indiana.

This last statistic demonstrates, once again, that we are the public research university in Indiana that is fully committed to serving Indiana.

These results are especially impressive given the declining demographics in the Midwest—fewer students are graduating from high school. And, here in Indiana, fewer high school graduates are choosing to go to college.

That’s why I am grateful to our colleagues in Enrollment Planning and Management and our colleagues in Marketing and Communications for their good work.

These results are also a reflection of the relationship-rich environment we cultivate on our campus.

In April, Rachelle Boatright, the parent of a prospective student, sent an email to our Admissions staff. Rachelle and her daughter had just toured another Indiana public university.

I’ll resist the temptation to say which one.

In her email, Rachelle wrote: “Your presentation, videos, and slides are so much better than the one here today. We are obviously just a number and no one really shows they care about individual students in the same way we felt at BSU.”

Rachelle’s email is a good reminder that everything we do demonstrates that we genuinely care about our students.

That’s why I want to acknowledge our faculty and staff in our colleges.

Since Fall 2021, undergraduate enrollment in our Estopinal College of Architecture and Planning has increased by 23 percent. Over that same period, undergraduate enrollment in our College of Fine Arts has increased 21 percent.

In five years, undergraduate enrollment in Teachers College has grown five percent.

And for the third year in a row, the incoming freshman class in our Honors College includes more than 550 of our best and brightest students.

Our graduate enrollment also remains steady. Once again this year, approximately 5,700 new graduate students enrolled this Fall. And once again this year, more than 2,500 students enrolled in our ABA program—making it one of the largest programs of its kind in the country.

A key reason we are experiencing enrollment gains when many other institutions are not is because of your commitment to develop new and innovative programs that serve the changing interests of our students and the evolving needs of employers.

Our new undergraduate programs in data analytics and forensic science continue to attract more students.

Our new online master's degrees in accounting and business analytics meet growing employer demand.

The new dual-degree partnership between our MBA program and ECAP serves professionals pursuing graduate work in interior design.

With input from healthcare providers, the College of Health relaunched our doctoral nursing program. This change led to a 35-percent enrollment increase in our graduate nursing programs.

Our hybrid graduate social work program—which is designed to serve rural Indiana—is also growing along with our online undergraduate social work program. In just ten years, enrollment in our social work programs has doubled to more than 500 students.

And a partnership between TC and the Miller College of Business has produced a certificate program in organizational behavior management that we're offering for the first time next Fall.

Another crucial component of our overall success—another way we boost recruitment—is the quality and reputation of our academic programs.

Last month, TC earned a national award for preparing educators to use technology in the classroom effectively and ethically.

Our Center for Professional Selling has been named a top sales program in the country by the Sales Education Foundation—a recognition that we've now received for 20 consecutive years.

For the second year in a row, our SportsLink program was named the best sports media program in the country by the Broadcast Education Association.

This Spring, our speech team won the national championship competition.

And Adam Kuban was named the Journalism Teacher of the Year by the Scripps Howard Fund. This award is a powerful example of the importance of our outstanding faculty, especially in fields that are changing dramatically.

As you well know, our total enrollment—and our ultimate goal of graduating students—is dependent on our efforts to increase the first-to-second year undergraduate retention rate.

We have seen good improvement in several programs.

For example, approximately 93 percent of last Fall's freshman class in our Honors College will return to campus this Fall, the college's highest retention rate since the pandemic.

In TC, the retention rate for our Fall 2024 cohort increased to 81 percent.

The retention rate in CSH increased three percentage points from a year ago.

These outcomes can be credited to our student success initiatives.

For example, every college has hired a dedicated student success director. Now, some faculty, like Dixie Denton in TC and Kaitlyn Daly in CFA, serve as partners with their college's student success directors to enhance this important work.

CSH continues to engage students in its Success Hub. Last year, more than 6,000 students used the Hub to study or to seek help from staff—that's a 16 percent increase in one year.

Academic support programs also help students succeed.

Our GRIP program, created by Melisa Stevens and Richard Petts, has improved student outcomes in nine gateway classes. As a result of faculty engagement, midterm feedback, and targeted outreach, the DFW rate for CSH last year declined to its lowest number on record.

And this Fall, our College of Health will introduce LAUNCH. This program will help first- and second-year students explore a range of healthcare careers. Dean Rutledge said LAUNCH is “an innovative way to help students discover their passion and purpose.”

This Fall, our total enrollment will be more than 20,000 students. In just four years, since Fall 2022, our total Fall enrollment has increased by approximately 1,500 students.

I am grateful to our colleagues in Cardinal Central. Last year, they managed 58,000 interactions—phone calls, emails, and virtual and in-person appointments.

Our students also support this work.

Patrick Myat has worked in our Learning Center for three years. In that time, he has conducted 400 tutoring sessions with more than 100 students. Many of these students said that Patrick made a difference in their ability to graduate.

Jason Rivera described Patrick as “the very best of what it means to foster belonging, learning, and excellence at Ball State.”

Another student who represented our “very best” is James Nichols.

James earned his bachelor’s degree from Ball State in 2023. He was finishing his graduate degree in social work when he died in March.

Like Patrick, James thrived helping other students succeed. As a CARDS mentor, James worked with freshmen with disabilities, helping them overcome challenges that might have kept them from graduating.

Unfortunately, James did not complete his graduate program. But in recognition of his academic achievements and his service, we presented his master’s degree posthumously to his family.

Another initiative that contributes significantly to student success is our distinctive high impact practices, including immersive learning.

This past year, the number of students who participated in immersive learning courses increased from 2,700 to 3,400—a 25 percent increase.

At the same time, the number of undergraduate students who conducted research with our faculty increased from approximately 1,500 to more than 1,700 students—a 13 percent increase.

Another high impact practice is our new study abroad program, which is called BSU-in. This program enables our students to take Ball State courses in other countries at the same tuition that a student pays for a semester here in Muncie.

Post-COVID—but before BSU-in—our semester-long study abroad participation had “rebounded” to fewer than 30 students. Last year, 115 students went abroad for a semester—a 300 percent increase in just two years!

Ashley Coker is our director of study abroad. Ashley, please stand so we can acknowledge the work that you’re doing to make these life-changing opportunities available to more students.

Here’s one very important reason why high impact practices are so important.

The retention rate for students who take a HIPs course in their first year is 81 percent—compared to 76 percent for first-year students who don’t take one.

Approximately 92 percent of students who enroll in a HIPs course in their second or third year are still enrolled by their fourth year—a percentage that drops to only 70 percent for students who don’t.

Our Living-Learning Communities also have a positive impact on retention. The retention rate for students who live in LLCs is 81 percent—three percentage points higher than our overall rate.

I am grateful to our team in residence life for making our LLC program a national model for other public universities.

Speaking of excellence, I am proud of how our student-athletes excel in competition and in the classroom.

We won two MAC conference titles this past year—in women's volleyball and women's basketball. And our men's volleyball team won both the MIVA regular season championship and the MIVA tournament championship. Our men's volleyball team also competed in the NCAA Final Four.

In total, we've now won 18 conference championships in the past six years—that's our best multi-year streak in more than 20 years.

More than 10 individual student-athletes also competed in NCAA championships. Let me tell you about two of them.

Peyton Kelly was the MAC Women's Swimmer of the Year, and she competed in three events in the NCAA championship meet.

Kenli Nettles competed in the heptathlon in the NCAA outdoor track championship. She was an All-American.

But their academic accomplishments are even more impressive.

Peyton graduated in May with a 3.97 GPA.

Kenli also graduated in May — with a perfect 4.0 GPA in her graduate program.

And, last year, our women's volleyball team had a combined team GPA of 3.86—the highest of any women's volleyball team in the country!

Speaking of impressive statistics, it was another good year for our fundraising.

Last year, we generated more than \$41 million in new gifts and commitments. As a result of the generosity of our graduates and benefactors, we have now exceeded our campaign goal of \$350 million. In fact, with more than 10 months to go in our campaign, we have now raised more than \$370 million.

That's why I am confident that, as we sprint to the finish line when the campaign ends in June, we will raise more than \$400 million. In fact, as Jean Crosby and her team know, I am very hopeful that we will raise more than \$425 million—which would more than double the total raised in our University's largest campaign.

One reason we have been so successful is because, as a result of One Ball State Day, we have put the “fun” back into fundraising. This year, we raised a record \$1.5 million on our eighth annual day of giving.

But I am particularly proud of three other statistics.

More than 150 faculty and staff served as campus ambassadors that day.

More than 1,200 gifts came from faculty and staff.

And on that one day, our students recorded and distributed more than 10,000 “thank you” videos to our donors.

These generous gifts enrich the academic experience for our students. For example, this Spring, we received a \$2.5 million grant from the Mellon Foundation to fund our new “Humanities in Action” program. In this program, students will discover the benefits of a humanities degree through a career-focused curriculum and paid internships. This semester, ten students in our pilot group have internships with nonprofit organizations. Eventually, 75 students will have this opportunity each year.

Our generous donors also support our commitment to enhance the impact we have in our community.

We have received more than \$50 million in philanthropic support to implement our ambitious plan to revitalize The Village.

Our Center for Innovation and Collaboration was completed last month. It’s now open for classes—and for business.

In December, we will have a grand opening in our Performing Arts Center, and The Cantio Hotel will open early next year.

Construction continues on Village South, the residential neighborhood that includes 25 owner-occupied townhomes and single-family homes.

And in a few weeks, we will begin to construct the new outdoor gathering space that will be in the heart of The Village. Our site plan, which includes redesigning the one block of Martin Street between Ashland and University Avenues, incorporates insights from a student design competition in ECAP.

So very soon, The Village will increase the number and the variety of arts and culture venues already on our campus.

This past year, thousands of people visited these campus venues. We welcomed 21,000 guests to our Brown Planetarium, and 23,000 people visited our Nature Lab and the Rinard Orchard Greenhouse. Events in Emens, Pruis and the Brown Family Amphitheater drew an additional 31,000 people to our campus.

The arts and cultural opportunities we provide—both the ones we provide now and the ones we will offer very soon—they are a tangible demonstration of how we enhance the quality of life for our friends and neighbors.

Our distinctive partnership with Muncie Community Schools is another example of our transformational community impact.

As we enter the ninth year of the partnership—and after years of stabilizing enrollment and investing in teachers and facilities—our MCS partners are now delivering on our ambitious promise of improved student outcomes.

Here are two impressive examples.

First, third grade reading test scores have increased significantly. In 2021, the passing rate on the state’s third grade reading proficiency test was only 59 percent. This year, the passing rate was 86 percent! That’s a 27-percentage point increase in just five years!

Second, the high school graduation rate has also increased. In 2020, 2021, and 2022, the graduation rate at Muncie Central was 82 percent. This year, the high school graduation rate was 94.5 percent. That's three percentage points higher than the statewide average!

These exceptional results are the product of the outstanding leadership of Chuck Reynolds, the CEO of Muncie Community Schools, and the dedicated service of the seven-member board that governs the school district.

Dr. Reynolds couldn't make it this morning, but a few members of the MCS administrative staff—Assistant Superintendent Dea Bell and Chief Financial Officer Brad DeRome—they are here along with four members of the MCS Board of Trustees: Jim Williams, WaTasha Barnes Griffin, Jim Lowe, and Katie Washburn.

Please stand so that we can recognize you and the outstanding teachers and staff for these excellent student outcomes.

When we embarked on this partnership eight years ago, I said that our goal—our promise—was to provide every young person in Muncie with the opportunity to get an outstanding public school education. You—you are honoring that promise. Thank you.

Now permit me to share a few examples of how we serve our region and our state.

This past year, we provided more than 11,000 health screenings and wellness events to our friends and neighbors in East Central Indiana, and our Interprofessional Community Clinics served more than 2,300 patients.

We are also actively participating in a regional coalition for rural health transformation that expands the services in our Healthy Lifestyle Center into counties that don't have hospitals.

We also provide objective news, important information, and engaging entertainment through Ball State Public Media.

I am particularly pleased that—as a result of our Public Media Accelerator—our students are now producing more local programming. This past year, our students created new episodes of a program called “Now Entering...”

This program chronicles the people, places, and histories of towns in our region. With each episode, the students held red carpet premieres. And the people who attended—they donated more than \$60,000 to support public media.

This support is particularly important because all state and federal funding for Ball State Public Media was eliminated last year. That's an annual total of \$1.4 million. I appreciate the creative ways in which Ball State Public Media is working to close this financial gap.

A few weeks ago, an original Bob Ross painting sold at auction for \$320,000. The bulk of those proceeds will benefit our PBS station. And last year, donors contributed \$1 million—more than double the previous year’s total.

Despite the lack of federal and state funding, Ball State Public Media will continue to honor our responsibility to the community—because our community needs and our community deserves objective news and information. Right, Kristen?

This past year there were other challenges.

One challenge was the ongoing renovations underway as part of our North Campus Renovation Project. Our colleagues in ECAP and CFA have been especially affected by this work. As aggravating as these disruptions are, you have proven to be agile and innovative.

For example, last Fall, ECAP established a new studio in downtown Muncie. This studio is a good example of how these renovations created an opportunity for us to strengthen our role as a community-engaged university.

Another challenge was our need to eliminate or merge low-enrolled academic programs as required by a new state law.

This process was particularly difficult because of the short amount of time we had to decide which of about 50 programs we would sunset or revise as required by the state mandate.

I know that many people in every college worked hard to meet this tight deadline. But I want to acknowledge someone for whom this process was an especially heavy lift.

Kevin Smith led these efforts in CSH. That college eliminated 10 programs and consolidated 38 programs into eight existing and four new programs across 12 different departments. Kevin, Dean McCarthy said that you are a “rockstar.” I appreciate the time you invested in this difficult work—work that required both courage and compassion.

As Dean McCarthy said: “With some of these programs, we had to make the decision to fight or to let go, and then to preserve the faculty in another way.”

While making these changes to our academic programs, we completed our new core curriculum— for the first time in 20 years.

As the provost said, the person responsible for making sure this vital initiative was completed was Debbie Mix.

Debbie is the director of our University Core Curriculum, and she spent countless hours leading the taskforce—hosting workshops and visiting departments to help faculty and staff understand the new core curriculum. As Debbie said: “It was imperative that all stakeholders had a chance to be part of this reimagining process.”

The result is our Cardinal Core, which now requires 30 credit hours instead of 36 credit hours. The core consists of 200 courses, including many new and reimagined courses.

When Debbie was asked what she was most proud of regarding the changes, she shared her excitement for our new Beneficence Themes. As one of the four pillars of the Cardinal Core, the Beneficence Themes offer students the opportunity to explore a specific topic of interest from a variety of perspectives.

As Debbie said: “Core curriculum classes should be something students are excited to take, not because they’re ‘distractions’ from their majors, but because they enhance their personal and professional lives.”

Debbie, please stand so that we can recognize the many ways in which your work has advanced the vital mission of our University.

We are also adjusting to our new 15-week academic calendar.

As part of this change, our colleagues in Student Affairs designed a comprehensive week of activities for first-year students to support their transition to college. These activities, which started on Monday and continue through Sunday, are part of our extended Weeks of Welcome. I am grateful to Abby Haworth and Olivia Vecchiolli for their dedication and their service.

Finally, there is one more challenge that I should address: the expense reductions required to balance this year’s operating budget. I am grateful to everyone who provided input as part of our consultative process to address our substantial reduction in state operating support. I want you all to know how much I value your input—and how much I appreciate your grace.

Because I know it was not easy. Thank you.

So, with all those challenges out of the way, I’m sure that this year will be smooth sailing, right? That’s how it goes in higher education in America today.

If only.

As we embark upon this new academic year, we know that challenges lie ahead.

Perhaps the biggest anticipated challenge is to what extent AI will impact our teaching and our students’ learning.

Now, some of you know that I am skeptical that AI will be as disruptive as many of its proponents predict.

Remember MOOCs—those so-called massive, open, online courses. More than 10 years ago, all the so-called “experts” predicted that MOOCs would completely decimate enrollment at traditional colleges and universities. Well, that didn’t happen.

And I don’t believe that AI will destroy higher education. But it certainly will affect us in profound—and unpredictable—ways.

That is why we have developed a deliberate and strategic approach to AI.

For example, we are incorporating the study of AI into more coursework. There's a new economics course in the Cardinal Core on the business of AI. And we are launching two new graduate certificates—one in AI Foundations and one in AI Theory and Ethics.

We have also created an Artificial Intelligence Strategy Committee. This committee meets every month to discuss AI initiatives, to coordinate projects, and to ensure that our adoption of AI remains strategic, safe, and secure across both the academic enterprise and our administrative services.

A few months ago, we submitted a \$12 million proposal to the Lilly Endowment. I am cautiously optimistic that we will receive this grant, which will advance our work preparing students—and our faculty and staff—for a future increasingly influenced by AI.

I am also hopeful that we may receive a second Lilly grant—this one for \$40 million. If we do, we will be able to lead a collaborative partnership with four other universities in Indiana to redesign the state's teacher preparation programs in light of the ongoing impact of AI.

But in my estimation, the advent of AI will not supplant the role people—our faculty and staff—the vital role that you play in the educational experiences that we provide to our students. Indeed, I believe that this technology actually elevates the importance of our Purpose Exploration initiative.

You see, a machine can have a function. But a machine can't have a "purpose" the way a human being can. Because a machine can't find fulfillment in its work. And a machine can't find meaning in its existence.

But we can find fulfillment in our work and we can find meaning in our lives. That's purpose.

Through our Purpose Exploration initiative, I believe we can do even more to help our students advance on their own distinctive pathway to purpose. It's a journey—because purpose is not a destination. Purpose is a direction. It's a compass.

Earlier this morning, the provost introduced Judy Lewandowski. Since she began her new role in February, Judy has been helping us to advance this important strategic priority.

This year, we will bring this plan to life by sharing resources that make it easier for faculty to incorporate purpose exploration into existing or new courses. We will also develop programs for faculty and staff to facilitate purpose-driven conversations, and we will incorporate purpose exploration into our student success programs.

Now, I know that this initiative is an ambitious one. But I am encouraged that our students are already making their own connections to purpose exploration—and to purpose discovery.

For example, in June, Sports Video Group—an organization that serves professionals in the sports broadcasting industry—SVG featured Jude Kieffer in its “Student to Watch” series.

SVG asked Jude about working on Sports Link’s weekly docuseries about our football program. Jude described the difficulties of spending a semester producing a weekly sports program while “figuring out how to be a full-time college student at the same time.” When Jude was asked what advice he would give to his freshman self, he said: “Consider your motivation. If you’re doing something for appearance or recognition, you will never move the needle. You have to love doing the thing, not just being seen doing the thing.”

That feeling that Jude described—that’s purpose.

At our Commencement ceremony in May, I presented the John R. Emens Award to Angel Vazquez. A few weeks before he graduated, Angel spoke about his student experience at an awards banquet.

In his remarks, Angel spoke about his early academic struggles. He said that it took him awhile to discover a simple, but profound truth.

Angel said: “I learned that happiness is difficult to find in yourself ... Nobody is coming to hand it to you. Not a title. Not an acceptance letter. Not a degree. The peace you’re looking for has to be built from the inside. Everything else is just evidence that the work is paying off.” Angel is right. That’s purpose.

Kerri Sasser also spoke at that awards ceremony. She said that her Ball State experience taught her that “this journey was never just about what I would achieve—it was about who I would become.”

Kerri described purpose as “not some perfect, step-by-step blueprint—but as a direction”. A direction—a compass—that Kerri described as “being grounded in something simple: That no matter where I go or what I do, what matters most is the impact I have on people around me—and the person I continue to become along the way.” That’s purpose.

Angel and Kerri will embody these important truths as Ball State graduates. And their stories affirm something that I know: We already do a very good job supporting the self-reflection and the exploration that empowers our students to pursue fulfilling careers and to lead meaningful lives. As we continue this work, I know that we will do an even better job in the years to come.

As part of her guidance to me, Judy recommended that I read *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl’s seminal work.

In this speech last year, I told you about Dr. Anna Ornstein, the mother of a childhood friend.

As you may recall, Dr. Ornstein survived being in a concentration camp during the Holocaust. She then became a world-renowned psychiatrist who believed that people were innately motivated—not by self-interest—but by compassion and by love for other people.

Dr. Frankl also credited his survival in the concentration camps to a method of psychoanalysis he developed as a young doctor. He called his approach logotherapy—or “meaning” therapy. It centers on our ability to find purpose in pain. As he wrote, “Suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning.”

After Dr. Frankl was liberated, he learned that his wife and many of his friends and family, including his parents, had all died in the camps. He was in despair.

Then he came to a powerful realization. He wrote, “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

In that moment, Dr. Frankl chose to finish his book about logotherapy. That book became *Man’s Search for Meaning*, which has sold more than 18 million copies.

Dr. Frankl’s book instructs us that, when challenges feel meaningless, we feel helpless. We lose hope. But when we connect life’s challenges to a greater meaning, those challenges drive us forward with great purpose.

This idea of purposeful action in response to challenges—it was on my mind when I read another powerful testimony—one written by one of our own students.

Earlier this morning, I introduced Aiden Davis, our student trustee.

In working with Aiden this past year, I got to know him pretty well. So, when he asked me for a letter of recommendation for his application to medical school, I immediately agreed.

During this process, I learned that Aidan was not only an exceptional student. He is a remarkable young man.

With Aiden’s permission, I am going to read to you the opening paragraph of the personal statement he submitted with his application:

“I was ten years old when I called my first ambulance. I was watching TV with my siblings when my mom called from upstairs. She was having trouble breathing, and her inhaler was no use. I called 911 for her, and that was the last time we saw her. Two hours later, I learned my mother had passed away from a pulmonary embolism.”

In his essay, Aiden described the impact of his mother’s death:

“I was overcome with fear, anger, and many questions ... I began to search for anything to answer my questions. I found the possible cures and treatments for her, but that only confused me more.”

Aiden began attending counseling and support groups. He wrote:

“Here, I learned what my emotions meant, how to manage them, how to channel my curiosity. It was the help that I got through these resources that allowed me to have clarity in my mother’s passing. Around this time, I had decided that I also wanted to have a life filled with a deep impact on other people.”

That’s Aiden’s purpose.

In high school, Aiden’s passion for medicine flourished. When the time came to apply for college, Aiden had the grades that would have easily gotten him into IU, his first choice.

But after touring our campus, he knew that Ball State University was where he wanted to be.

In his first year at Ball State, Aiden was invited by his anatomy professor to become a teaching assistant. That same professor introduced him to fulfilling work volunteering at the Muncie Mission Medical Clinic. That experience led to opportunities for Aiden to shadow physicians at IU Ball Memorial Hospital.

These experiences reminded Aiden that, in his own words: “There is always more to learn, and that life is all about learning.” Aiden is pursuing his purpose—not in despair, but with abiding hope.

Last year during this program, Professor Katherine Denker received our Outstanding Faculty Award. So, she was invited to serve as our Commencement speaker just last month.

In her remarks, Kathy spoke about how our graduates are entering a workforce that is being transformed by AI—which may cause them to question whether their work will be valued.

She encouraged them not simply to be optimistic. Instead, she suggested that they choose hope. Because in her own words:

“‘Hope’ says, ‘Even if I don’t know how this turns out, what I choose to do still matters.’”

She said, “Hope isn’t pretending the future will be easy.

Hope is deciding the future is still worth building.”

Kathy asked our graduates to reflect on their Ball State experience and to reflect on how hope was their constant companion. She said:

“Hope looked like one more draft. One more lab. One more weekend in the studio. One more cup of coffee. Hope looked like staying.”

Kathy concluded this portion of her speech with this insight:

“Education has always been—and always will be—an act of hope.

“Hope is our profession.”

Kathy’s right, hope is our profession.

Hope is an integral component of our core mission. And in an increasingly uncertain world—when the challenges we face can be demoralizing—it is in these times that our work is more important—and more valuable—than ever before.

Let me tell you about two graduates who have come to embrace “hope” as the pathway through life’s challenges.

In May, I recorded a conversation with Len Forkas for my podcast. Len earned his degree in 1982. He returned to campus to deliver the Commencement address at ECAP’s ceremony.

Len and I spoke for more than an hour about how his Ball State degree empowered him to pursue a fulfilling career as an entrepreneur and as an author. But what impressed me most about Len was the purpose he derived when his son was diagnosed with leukemia.

At the time, Matt was just a kid who couldn’t go to school, because of his chemotherapy treatments. Len came up with the idea to bring Matt’s classroom home to him via a web cam.

Len said: “During the course of Matt’s treatment, as his face ballooned up from the steroids, as his hair fell out, those 24 kids in his third-grade class saw it in real time. And we didn’t realize this, but we were demystifying cancer for those children.”

To counter his own fears, Len channeled his anxiety into running marathons. Then, Len began competing in extreme sports—like riding 3,000 miles across the country on a bicycle in just 12 days—to raise money for the webcams he purchased for other children with cancer like Matt.

Last year, Len raised \$1 million by climbing to the summit of Mount Everest. In total, he has now helped more than 6,000 children with cancer stay connected to their classrooms in all 50 states.

The name of Len’s non-profit organization is HopeCam.

In June, I recorded a podcast conversation with Tim Andrews. Tim is a member of our foundation board, and he’s a generous benefactor.

Tim recently retired after serving 23 years as the CEO of a large company. Before that, he was a journalist and an executive at Dow Jones and Company.

In the podcast, Tim talked about his humble beginnings, growing up with an absent father and a disabled mother in a home that lacked running water. In his own words, Tim said: “I was this 10- or 12-year-old kid who would go to a Marsh supermarket and walk around and get the things on our grocery list, and use food stamps to check out ... It was not the easiest upbringing.”

Tim credits the neighbors who helped his family, the teachers who inspired him in high school, and the faculty and staff at our University—he credits these people for his fulfilling career and his meaningful life.

During my conversation with Tim, I asked him how he led his employees through multiple crises, including 9/11.

Tim said: “I think you have to be very honest with people about what’s happening. You can’t be Pollyanna and say, it’s all fine and you don’t need to worry about anything. I think you have to lay out hope.”

Tim Andrews grew up in a mobile home just outside of a small town in southern Indiana—a town named Hope.

I’d like to share one last story—a story that illustrates how, each day, you give our students hope.

In Fall 2024, Emily Garcia participated in our study abroad program in Puebla, Mexico. Emily spent the semester studying in the same town where her mother once worked in the fields as a child. There, in that town, Emily found great purpose in connecting her academic goals to become a speech pathologist with a deeply personal family journey.

To achieve her dream of studying abroad, Emily applied for a scholarship.

In her scholarship essay, Emily wrote: “I am my mother’s tears and her childhood dreams. I am my grandmother’s trauma and suffering, her silence and exhaustion. To be the child of an immigrant is to carry the hopes and dreams of your lineage. As the first woman in my family to attend college, I carry this responsibility with pride. Everything I do is for the women in my family who were once dreamers, but no longer dream. For them, for us, I will study abroad.”

That’s Emily’s profound purpose.

Because of the work that you do each day, you inspire our students to find their purpose. You give them hope for the future. And for so many of them, you help them make their dreams become a reality—their dreams for a world that they will make. A world that we all believe will be more peaceful and more just. That is their hope. That is our purpose.

I am so very grateful that I have the opportunity to serve you, because of the positive and enduring impact that you have on their lives—and on our world.

Thank you for what you do—and for allowing me to do that work with you.

Thank you very much.

As you know, I like to conclude this program each year with a musical performance by some of our talented students.

This year, I had a clear idea of what song I wanted our students to sing. Consistent with my final thoughts, it’s a song about hope—about dreams.

The song is called “A Million Dreams.” It’s from the movie “The Greatest Showman,” which starred Hugh Jackman.

In addition to the appropriate title and lyrics, I have come to know that Hugh Jackman is a kind, considerate, and generous person.

So, for all these reasons, I thought “A Million Dreams” was the perfect song for this occasion.

But as you well know, each year, I select a song. And then, Bill Jenkins and Michael Rafter—well, they often choose a different song for our students to perform.

And this year, Bill and Michael have selected “The Impossible Dream” from the musical, “Man of La Mancha.”

So now, please welcome to the stage our outstanding students, who are accompanied by Michael Rafter, as they perform “The Impossible Dream.”