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# Welcome and the 3 E's: Empowerment, Encouragement and Excitement

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ACADEMICS ▾

ADMISSIONS & AID ▾

CAMPUS LIFE ▾

ATHLETICS ▾

ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY ▾

ALUMNI ▾

Home

President Birx

Administration & Office Staff

Plymouth State University Mission Statement

Presidential Addresses

PSU Vision – Presidential Blog Posts

President's Council

Commissions & Initiatives

Communication Transparency

Strategic Plan: Focus 2020

Organizational Chart

Past Presidents

Excellence at PSU

Here I Am!

## Office of the President

Welcome and the Three E's: Empowerment, Encouragement, and Excitement

### UNIVERSITY DAY

Monday, August 22, 2016

Hanaway Theatre

President Don Birx Remarks:

Welcome and the Three E's: Empowerment, Encouragement, and Excitement

Welcome to a new school year at Plymouth State, one that I am sure will be exciting, challenging and at times chaotic, but which starts us on our path to create an incredible and uniquely PSU future for ourselves, our region and most of all, our students. My question to you is: Are you ready?

A year ago I stood here with you for the first time as we embarked on our journey together. We laid out a vision for the future of Plymouth, a vision filled with possibilities. We were hopeful and excited, but little did we know then what we had gotten ourselves into, the challenges we would face or where that journey would lead us in the coming year.

But we have faced those challenges, we have openly discussed our future, we have made the decisions together we needed to make as painful as those decisions were (and they were painful for all of us) and we are moving forward to create the PSU that we envisioned. And if I was hopeful before, I am even more hopeful today. While before it was a vision, today we move to implementation, to creating form, to making our vision a reality. This morning many of you have already participated in the University Days' workshops and over the next few days there will be sessions on each aspect of our planning for the coming year. Please try to attend as many sessions as you can. I say this particularly for those of you who are supervisors and staff. These are no longer just faculty days, but university days and we need all of you to take part.

Whether it seems like it to us or not, we have already accomplished much and are well on the way to creating one of the most engaging and forward thinking universities in the nation. We truly are creating a 21<sup>st</sup> Century University built around the key principles of exploration and discovery and innovation and entrepreneurship. We have linked together these concepts in fluid clusters along with Arts and Technologies; Health and Human Enrichment; Justice and Security; Education, Democracy and Social Change; and Tourism, Environment and Sustainable Development – to create an educational experience that will be second to none and which builds and strengthens our PSU legacy of interdisciplinary study and experiential learning.

We have a new vision and mission statement based on transformation of our students, our community and ourselves and the reintegration of the liberal arts into these seven trans-disciplinary clusters. We have created three new open laboratories and allowed the addition of a fourth credit to some classes to give us the opportunity to work together in engaged scholarship with each other and our larger community. We are beginning the process of looking at how we can theme our general education in a way that creates families of courses that span the clusters. We are reconfiguring and streamlining our organization and processes to empower decision-making and enhance innovation and creative expression. We are doing the things that were laid out in University Day last year and I

encourage each of you to re-read that speech which can be found on the [PSU Vision](#) web page. I think you will find that we have been resolute and consistent in our message and direction.

Remembering that last year we said we would begin to market our clusters to our incoming class of students, donors and community, we are launching a new marketing campaign this year to do just that – as well as working with the media to tell our story. We are looking at First-Year seminars as a launching pad for all our students who will be joining clusters and we have started organizing ourselves and our programs into the broad framework of clusters. For those of you who led and participated in the successful URSA process, we thank you and; as has been said, we have used the URSA process to inform many of our decisions with respect to programs and will continue to do so in the future. This is a new PSU we are creating built on the unique roots of what Plymouth has always been: a place where students come first and where we do everything possible in small classes and with engaged scholarship to create generations of global scholars who can work across boundaries, disciplines and geography.

Some of you have had concerns. Is this the right path for PSU? Does it fit into the changing landscape of higher education and impart important skills and knowledge needed to function in our modern global environment? You only have to look at any of the challenges we face, whether it is the slowing process of discovery and innovation, sustainable development, nation formation and reformation, climate change that threatens our very existence, the timeless issues of disease and poverty, our aging population, or a world of turmoil with clashing ideologies to realize these are not discrete discipline based challenges, but challenges that require working across disciplines if we are to succeed in finding a solution.

On the national scene there was and still is an ongoing struggle and an outcry against higher education for sameness, high cost, lack of relevance and imagination and prescriptions that are, in my opinion, worse than our supposed disease. If you think this is just a temporary setback, please think again. It is the new reality. Our economy is in trouble and that economy is what funds higher education directly and indirectly. This is a time of contrasts. There is so much cash out there that investors are paying banks to keep their money, meanwhile there is rampant stagnation in the middle class with many college graduates unemployed or underemployed and all, in my view, because there is a lack of imagination and creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship. Moreover, the environment for Higher Ed is getting more competitive. With clusters, we can bring these challenges right into the classroom and open laboratories.

Clusters are a bridge to this new PSU where great and exciting adventures await us and our students. The trustees saw this and that is why they have invested in us. But you have to trust the bridge, embrace the risk and keep an eye on the rails as we change the path of this train, because some rails may not have been laid yet and we are counting on you to point that out and get out of the train with the rest of us and lay them when needed. I told you there is a bright future ahead for Plymouth and I promised we could get there, but we will only be able to do that together and if we keep moving forward. Clusters and our transdisciplinary education with open laboratories, themed General Education modules, and knowledge and experience to work and link across disciplines, give our students a unique advantage upon graduation.

There are some hopeful signs. The new residence hall and conference center made good progress over the summer. I know this because of all the banging and clanging that started early in the morning and the weekends we spent in the dark without any power...but it is all good. This will provide room for our growing student population and living learning laboratories. In the summer, it can be used as a conference center with hotel like rooms for events. Our goal this year is to fill the residence hall while consolidating and building our events planning program. This is important because student housing generates part of the margin that allows us to invest in a quality education for our students (Educational & General Budget).

Some have remarked that many things are changing at once and that is true. I know that creates uncertainty and confusion. We are following a path of overall organizational change that requires that we transform holistically in steps rather than taking one or two areas and working on them individually. This transformation will necessitate our patience and initiative. So how can you function in such an environment? In Physics, we have something called perturbation theory. The idea is that you hold the fundamentals and vary the peripheral or second order items. Now you are probably thinking we are changing some really fundamental things, but I would say in return, we really are not. **We want** to deliver the best education possible – one that gives students the skills and knowledge to be successful contributors as they follow their passion. **We want** students to feel involved outside and inside the classroom and to feel a closeness to each other and to faculty and staff that foments their development as adults and makes them feel like they are part of our family – a home away from home. **We want** our students to be challenged and to use their time here effectively to grow in knowledge and wisdom as well as emotionally and in character development. **We want** to train a generation of scholars and doers that change their world for the better and we need to do that at a cost that does not mortgage their future. **We also want** to have impact on our community and to be a contributor to its success. Aren't those the fundamentals? How we are organized and methodologies and policies we have generated over time.....do you really think they are fundamental? Aren't they there just to serve in achieving our fundamental goals and shouldn't they change as our world and students change? If you don't agree with this, I encourage you to view the film *Most Likely to Succeed* which we plan to show on campus this Fall.

Likewise, and we all have this tendency, anything that starts with my, or mine or this is the way it has been, or I feel comfortable in doing this or that this way, or we have always done it this way, or this is my area of expertise, my research, or my job, and I say this with the greatest respect and care, is not fundamental. Our focus is on the fundamentals – our students; and we are perturbing the framework, our methods and policies and organization, in a calculus of variation approach, where we feel the freedom to alter things that are not fundamental in an effort to improve the things that are.

Now, for those of you that think we are moving too fast or too slow, I say:

1) Stay focused on the fundamentals. They are the ground on which we are recreating this great institution. 2) Keep flexible and adaptable. Don't get stuck in past methods or approaches. 3) Don't get overwhelmed with the scope of change occurring. We will not fully achieve our vision this year. The idea is to keep moving forward a little bit and sometimes in leaps at a time, making sure all the pieces fit together a little better – like a puzzle we are creating that takes time to fill in. I don't know about you, but the first thing I put together is the frame for the picture (that was this last year) and after that, piece by piece I put the pieces together all over the puzzle in little groupings and then I build the bridges between the groups until I finally have the whole picture filled in. This year as we are doing the little groupings, the pieces we are each working on, and together we are looking over the whole puzzle to see where our pieces fit into the larger whole, knowing we might have to rearrange them a bit as everything comes together. 4) Contribute wherever you can and be patient and encouraging with each other and do not fear failure. Use this as a learning opportunity. Take risks. 5) Revel in being a part of something that is revolutionary and seminal, yet harkens back to our roots – that will make a real difference in our student's lives. 6) If you are involved in unionization talks this Fall for both the teaching lecturers and tenured and tenure track faculty, work with us to create a progressive path forward. 7) If you don't like the changes that are going on, do what you feel comfortable doing and don't stand in the way of others who are moving ahead. That will only make what we are trying to do fail. Contribute where you can and do the best job you can (focusing on the fundamentals) and when you feel more comfortable with the changes going on around you, join in where you think you can, be helpful and know that you are welcomed. 8) If you are ready to go, and have an idea of how to move forward, push ahead and welcome others that join you and contribute to the vision. And, 9) if you are ready to go and are not sure what to do, join those who have an idea of what to do, or form a group of others to brainstorm with, or ask your supervisor for some pointers. Don't complain about things not moving fast enough. And remember the cluster guides and process coaches are here to help us.

Now, to those who have asked, what do I tell others about what is happening at PSU? I have suggested that each of you have a 30 second to one minute talk in your own words that excites and resonates with you. To get you started, I have an example that is similar to what I have used, but which I tailor to my audience:

**We are building a new kind of university, one that integrates the liberal arts in unique ways to give Plymouth State students the credentialed interdisciplinary skills, in small interactive classrooms that allow them to excel in their chosen field of study. Our students will work with other students, faculty, staff and community members from different disciplines in open laboratories to solve real world challenges, building connections with community partners and businesses, even as they develop links with other students who have complementary skills. They will refine their creative abilities in teams within seven cluster areas, from Exploration & Discovery through to Innovation & Entrepreneurship and including Health & Human Enrichment; Tourism, Environment & Sustainable Development: Education, Democracy & Social Change, Justice & Security and Arts & Technologies. These clusters resonate with community strengths and needs, and 21<sup>st</sup> century global challenges. We believe this approach will give our students a distinctive edge in transitioning seamlessly to an engaging and successful career in a global trans-disciplinary economy, the ability to found their own company (profit or non-profit) and the potential to continue on to a graduate school that builds on these concepts – hopefully at PSU in a 4+1 program.**

**We are developing world changers and giving our students the lifelong learning skills to make their dreams become a reality and turn their passion into high impact careers. Our goal is for our students in these cluster areas to be the most in demand graduates on the planet.**

I'm sure you can do better than my example. I am way too wordy. But we have a lot to tell the world and I wanted to share as much as I could with you in 30 seconds.

I wanted to speak for a few moments about our clusters. Our seven clusters are built on concepts or ideas that have the power to revolutionize the education we are giving our students. I know you may be thinking that is too strong of a word, but think about it. Putting together Arts & Technologies is revolutionary. Innovation is a crucial part of lifelong learning and doing something with it that has impact on the world is not only important but also critical to our future.

Exploration and discovery are key components in the advancement of knowledge and something we all do with ties to STEM and STEAM and is much broader than our traditional thinking. But having these as key themes (exploration and discovery through to innovation and entrepreneurship) spread across the university beyond business and science colleges is unique. These ideas still need a home, hence the cluster names, but now the

concepts are set free to interact across the university and be part of all our clusters.

And please don't get caught up in names and terminology. The reality is that clusters are a moniker, a euphemism, a way of expressing and organizing what we are doing here at Plymouth. It is the embodiment of a bold set of ideas. In that light, entrepreneurship, from my point of view, just means an undertaking to change the world and that's what we're doing!

I know that the phasing out of departments concerns some, but moving away from departments does not mean moving away from disciplines. Discipline based communities will still have primary responsibility for major(s) to include curriculum, scholarship review, faculty hiring recommendations and P & T input, within the cluster environment. And on the more positive side, moving away from departments relieves some of our most engaging faculty from administrative duties, freeing them to be involved more fully and synergistically in teaching, scholarship, and service without the distractions of personnel management, scheduling, and student complaints. There is also the question of the expense of release time tied to chairs while moving them out of the classroom to do administrative duties that others can do and want to do as part of their career growth. Clusters allow for a more team led, synergistic and systematic environment of integrated activities, facilitating the design of efficient processes to support them and for a stronger focus on content and coordination. More details will be forthcoming, but much of this organizational structure will be developed jointly over the next year, by all of us – starting today.

Over the summer, with help from others, I have written seven blog posts that give further rationale to what we are doing and why. Those posts, found on the [Pioneering PSU](#) webpages, highlight the (1) the Reintegration of the Liberal Arts, (2) Student Success, (3) Branding, Uniqueness, Identity and Reputation, (4) Exploration, Discovery, Innovation and Entrepreneurship, (5) Enhanced Opportunity for Partnerships, (6) A Streamlined and Empowered Administrative Structure, (7) and finally, A Holistic and Integrative education that links Research, Education, and Service in a way that builds a new PSU Culture and creates a lasting Legacy for our Children. If you get a chance, check out the [Yammer site](#) and write a comment and share your thoughts.

Now for those of you who haven't read my blog yet, but hopefully will, here is a short synopsis:

#### **Reintegrating the Liberal Arts:**

Years ago (when the pillars of the liberal arts were first established) it was believed that if an individual studied seven (to nine) subject areas they would have the tools they needed to learn, succeed, grow, and interact with the world around them. In other words, they would be fully equipped with an integrated perspective.

However, it was during the last two centuries that the liberal arts became increasingly fragmented (following their scientific cousins). In an attempt to overcome the narrowness of perspective, the concept of general education was introduced. Unfortunately, as good an idea as it was, it often did not yield an integrated perspective but became a smorgasbord of areas of study in which the student picked a course or two here or there with no understanding of how all these courses were relevant to their interests or core studies. With this approach, it is next to impossible to think critically, communicate effectively, and work together synergistically, hence the need to reintegrate the liberal arts. The clusters are a mechanism to accomplish this.

Another driver for clusters is **Student Success**: There are three parts to Student Success: (1) recruiting of students who resonate with what we are teaching – who come here because of what we have to offer, (2) retaining those students because they are integrated into the community, engaged with each other, faculty, staff and the community in their pursuit of knowledge, (3) and graduating students who are prepared for a career of passion and impact with the requisite skills and experience to succeed.

We had previously defined and advertised ourselves as a regional comprehensive university. But why do that when students come here for the small classes, the beautiful region, the sense of community and programs of study that hold their particular interests?

Clusters focus on our unique strengths in areas that resonate with our community, our region and our people with holistically integrated programs that define us and fit together into a synergistic "cluster".

Having students who come to Plymouth State because of what we have to offer is not only important for recruiting, but it is also the starting point for greatly improved retention. These students will come with an idea of how they fit in. They will be engaged immediately with faculty and other students through thematic general education courses, First-Year seminars and open laboratories that create a sense of community that spans the disciplines and reintegrates the university. This also applies to their residential and social experience. Residence space can become theme based open laboratories, as well as using the HUB and Field House with similar goals. Some of you have seen how powerful this can be with the [10,000 Steps](#) pilot that bridged art and environment. Our university is the perfect size to make this work.

As students go through their years at Plymouth State, they will build the relationships, skills and experience that will position them well to be global leaders in their fields of study. They will have built connections with other students in a host of disciplines, garnered certificates in thematic areas that intersect their chosen field and they will have seen



how their expertise can be teamed with others to successfully solve the challenges of our partner organizations and the world. Transition to an impactful career will then be just part of the overall process, not something separate that a student must figure out for themselves. No one should get left out or leave this university without the tools to have a sustainable career while pursuing their passion.

#### **Branding, Uniqueness, Identity and Reputation:**

Plymouth State used to be known as a teachers college and somewhat later it also became known for training in business. When we became a college, then a university, and finally a regional comprehensive university, we lost not only our focus but our uniqueness.

Clusters give us the focus and coherence that has been missing in our messaging and highlights a key long-term strength of Plymouth State – our interdisciplinary and integrated approach to education. It also leverages our location and regional strengths. This is not something that came from me, it is something PSU has always had, but now clusters provide a way to highlight and message it. So we have organized our marketing materials and our funding requests around our seven clusters. How we market to students, businesses, governments, taxpayers, and donors is now being based on our uniqueness and national strengths not our sameness to everyone else. How can that not be a better way to view this great university that we are so proud to be part of?

#### **Exploration, Discovery, Innovation and Entrepreneurship:**

I receive the most comments and concerns about the Innovation and Entrepreneurship cluster. It goes hand in hand with another of our clusters, Exploration and Discovery. The history of the word entrepreneurship from the French and the Latin is the idea of one who undertakes. Qualities to be embraced in the spirit of entrepreneurship involve being comfortable with ambiguity, not being afraid to fail (afraid to the point of not taking any action), being willing to live with risk, and being willing to sometimes make it up as you go along (in the sense of learning as you are doing). Entrepreneurs innovate because they see problems as opportunities. By modeling entrepreneurship in our organizational structure and our integrative cluster engagements, we are teaching our students the art and science of entrepreneurship. I hope you can see that the idea of action and undertaking to make something come of what we are exploring and discovering, of innovation in both teaching and research – with a result that benefits the student and the world, and teaching others to do the same — is part of the essence of what we are about.

#### **Enhancing Opportunities for Partnerships:**

Plymouth State has long been a university of partnerships. It started at our very conception in education and teacher training and grew through the years as we added programs and became such an important driver of life and resource in and for the North Country. But to help the North Country and our students, we need to broaden our sights and bring the strengths of Southern New England into partnership with the North. We need to build the links that will transform our region and bring the dynamisms and excitement of real world challenges into the classroom much the way it was done when public higher education was founded with the Morrill Act in 1862.

To do this we are creating open laboratories and we have formed the Center for Business and Community Partnerships. But the idea of partnerships is broader than the idea of external partnerships and encompasses partnerships across the university as well. So everyone is included in this idea of partnerships and it is a basic tenant of what we have been and will be as we move to clusters.

#### **A Streamlined and Empowered Administrative Structure:**

Our administrative structure grew over time in a somewhat haphazard fashion in response to our periods of growth and decline. The unintended consequences of this included a system of multiplicative and duplicative structures that made decision making and resultant action complicated and confusing. Concomitant with this were costs that were increasingly exceeding revenue, and growing layers of approval that were required to do anything. The growing number of departments, majors and divisions fractured us into silos with little authority or relational understanding. Adding colleges only exasperated the situation and tended to leave those in charge wondering their role, who really controlled the budget, and what they were empowered to do. Clusters put us back together again and facilitate trans-disciplinarity while streamlining our processes and empowering those who are closest to the point where decisions need to be made. They are also highly efficient, allowing faculty to allocate more of their time to teaching, to enhancing the student experience, to expanding research projects and initiating service missions and less to administration. And clusters give staff a significant role in the education of our students, providing services in a connected and thoughtful way that increases opportunity for everyone and relates and builds on classroom studies.

#### **A Holistic and Integrative Education that links Research, Education, and Service in a way that builds a new PSU Culture and Creates a lasting Legacy for our Children:**

Clusters allow us to go back to that time when we really did believe we could change the world and create a holistic educational environment that links together research, education and service into engaged scholarship at a

university level, where we all play a role and all roles are valued – one where the people closest to needing to take action are empowered to do what needs to be done for the betterment of our institution.

It is a cultural change in thinking that brings us together and makes each of us – faculty, staff, student, and community a part of something larger than ourselves – a team in which we can see and value the work each of us does in this much greater endeavor. This is an adventure – it is exciting, and it matters. We are pioneers, not traveling a well-worn path but opening new territory for ourselves, our community and most of all, our students.

Know that with this comes the most extensive restructuring of the administration, facilities, and curricula at PSU in many years and reflects not only our move to clusters and our response to financial challenges but an effort to empower all of you and remove barriers and redundancies. Our focus has tended to be on the academic side of things as it should be, but administratively this includes the integration of offices like graduate and undergraduate admissions, a myriad of changes in Academic Affairs and the Registrar's office, consolidations to create a one-stop experience for students where possible, success coaches for advising, regrouping in Student Affairs with a partial move to Mary Lyon and the Frost House, IT's consolidation and partial move to the second floor of Highland Hall, the Office of Sponsored Programs' move to Lamson Library, and Academic Support Services, including the PASS and disability offices', move to Mary Lyon. This is just part of the changes, as HR will be moving to Speare, with UPD potentially replacing them in their current location. We are considering the future of the Bagley House as a Greek and Student Life center should we bring back fraternities and sororities. And then there is the new peace garden that was created this summer alongside Hyde Hall and numerous renovation projects and open lab spaces in various stages of completion.

Change is everywhere, including the Cabinet, where almost everyone is new and there are quite a few additional members because we want to be as inclusive as possible of all parts of the university while reducing layers of administration where feasible. We've had two new cabinet members join us from outside the university: Jason Moran as Dean of Enrollment Management and Tracy Claybaugh as Interim VP of Finance and Administration.

These new members join others you may already know well from their other roles at PSU and they will talk next about these transitions from their perspective. These changes and others will or have been all be charted out and posted on the web, including the names of new contact points and their locations.

In addition, as we are moving to clusters, we have guides for clusters and coaches for oversight of administrative processes to assist in the launch and organization of this new PSU. Guides have been meeting throughout the summer and are leading our discussions during University Days. Paralleling these discussions are those focusing on building an administrative structure around the clusters. Overseeing these activities will be coaches Marcia Schmidt Blaine, Tracy Claybaugh and Terri Dautcher.

Some of you have expressed concerns that with all these changes occurring you are being asked to do more with less and new activities as well. As we first talked when I came here, our goal is not doing more with less but doing better with what we have. I encourage you to ask if there is another way that achieves what is needed by doing less of what we were doing before and doing new things in a different way. This is something we will work through in the coming year and we will need each other to do it. Again, I encourage you to submit your ideas to [PSU-Great-Ideas@plymouth.edu](mailto:PSU-Great-Ideas@plymouth.edu), where your suggestions will be reviewed by Cabinet, cluster guides and process coaches.

I hope you sense my enthusiasm and hope. We have an incredibly exciting year ahead of us! – even as there is no more challenging period than the year that lies ahead. It is now that we begin to convert vision into reality. Yes, there have been and will be many changes and we must recreate and build, and not like we did in the past. We must let go and look forward. This is a time of opportunity; grasp it! Let's pull together our general education courses into themed certificates that span the clusters and give students coherent breadth, create classes with open laboratory components, develop or extend first year seminars to provide students an introductory perspective on clusters, and begin to integrate our residential life and athletics with our classroom experience and align our processes to efficiently and effectively support our students. The world is looking at us to find a way out of the problems higher education is facing and economic stagnation that we are experiencing. Let's prove that we have the courage and stamina to change our destiny, with answers that lead us on a better path to a bright future for all of us.

As always, I want to thank each of you for all you do every day, individually and together, as we transform PSU into a healthy, sustainable community that we are all proud to be a part of and which prepares our students for a life of passion and impact.

Donald L. Birx

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