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A Vision for the Future of Plymouth State University

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Office of the President

A Vision for the Future of Plymouth State University

UNIVERSITY DAY

Wednesday, August 26, 2015

Hanaway Theatre

President Don Birx Remarks:

A Vision for the Future of Plymouth State University

OUR CURRENT STATE

Good morning everyone, and welcome to the very first University Day at Plymouth State. It is exciting to be here with you as one of you and to be in a place where there is so much commitment to our students and each other, to this place, and to its mission. There were two reasons I came here: place and people. But of these two, you are the heart and soul of this place and I sensed this from my first visit.

I know that today's schedule is a change from past meetings and hopefully there is some excitement and anticipation in the air about all of us coming together today. And I know, admitted or not, that there are some concerns, but we have some pretty big challenges ahead and some great opportunities. I wanted you all here to understand where we are and how we will need to work together to position ourselves for the future that we desire ... a brighter future. I also believe that as North Carolina's famous basketball coach once said, "Two are better than one ... but only if they play as one." I want us to play as one. I want us to be leaders in this ongoing transformation of higher education that is going on all around us. And who among us doubts that higher education is in a period of great change?

First, though, I want to thank all of you for being so open and engaging in my first weeks here at Plymouth. Everyone has been fantastic, even University Police. Trying to make up for the absence of students when I first got here, I managed to create two police disturbances my first week and become well known by everyone on the force, and that doesn't include setting off the fire alarm three times with my cooking. I can tell you they are on top of things and all know me by sight now.

I have enjoyed living in the student apartment and interacting with our students. Last night we even took selfies together in the dining hall (I went there because I got tired of my own cooking). And although there have been interviews in newspapers and radio, I'm excited by the prospect of being on TV. You see, after sending my wife a picture of my apartment with all our stuff in it, she said she was sending in a nomination for the Hoarders show.

Seriously though, it is that commitment and dedication to Plymouth's *Ut prosim* ethic that permeates this place and all the incredible people in the audience today; and it is all of you who give me the greatest hope for our future.

Today is about our future together. When I came here in both the interview and my introduction, I promised to be honest and transparent. So we are going to start today with some candid assessments by the cabinet. We're not going to blow smoke and we're not going to hide anything. You will know what I know, and if I don't know it, the cabinet should know and if they don't know, we'll just figure it out together. So feel free to ask us anything today.

Each vice president is going to take a few minutes to talk about both the tremendous successes and opportunities we have had and will have in each of their areas as well as the very real challenges that are keeping us awake at night. There are many of both. Then I am going to come back and talk with you a bit about what I see as some of the possibilities for the future, what our vision might look like based on my conversations thus far. It involves change, not change for the sake of change, not change that you are not involved in, but thoughtful, well considered change that builds on the best of what Plymouth is and positions us and our students for leadership in this competitive global environment. So, let's start off with our Provost, Julie Bernier.

(Strengths and Challenges with Cabinet Members: Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Julie Bernier, Vice President for Enrollment Management and Student Affairs Jim Hundrieser, Vice President for Finance and Administration Steve Taksar, and Vice President for University Advancement Paula Lee Hobson)

Thank you all. They'll be back for a town hall meeting later today and you'll have another opportunity to ask any question you would like. But I hope this gives you a good picture of the results of all your hard work, but also the sends the message that we are at a critical junction for the future of PSU. The opportunities and the building blocks are here because of all of you, but over the next few years we must build on this foundation a coherent and focused vision for the future. We must seize the opportunities, of place, people, and community, to create a Plymouth for the twenty-first century. Now it is time for a short break and then we'll be back.

BUILDING ON URSA AND FOCUS 2020 TO CREATE A VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF PLYMOUTH STATE UNIVERSITY

I am sure you are wondering why we started out with cabinet presentations on strengths and challenges this morning. The cabinet and I thought it was really important to share all the great opportunities that Plymouth has right now, because we are on the threshold of building a new future together. You also needed to hear the challenges. It is important to know our strengths, as well as the challenges, if we are to find a path together to a brighter future.

This discussion today is all about our new path forward. Together we will define that path. In our discussion we will focus on three things: vision, clusters, and open labs. Some of you have read my papers and know already about some of what I will be talking about — our conversations will help us transform Plymouth State from where we are today to where we are tomorrow.

Higher education and our economy are going through one of the greatest upheavals since public higher education got its start with the Morrill Act that gave land to each state to establish public universities. They are inextricably linked — you cannot talk about one without the other. In 1862, when Abraham Lincoln, in the midst of the civil war, signed the Morrill Act, the United States was arguably a backwater in the industrial revolution, a source for raw materials and agricultural products with a growing population and a depleted land that was growing less and less productive. Imports of finished goods outnumbered finished exports by four to one. We were a country that was all about natural resources for “advanced economies” in Europe. Eighty-five percent of our population was working on farms.

The purpose behind the founding of really widely available higher education was twofold: to educate farmers (which most of us were) and research the best methods for sustainable productivity growth in farming while training those coming off the farms to be leaders in developing the new industrial economy. These new universities were “open laboratories” where industry and education met — where the liberal arts played a key role along with engineering and agriculture in our nation's future. If you looked at pictures from that time they were of labs with the new machinery of industry all around; there were students and faculty out in the fields working alongside farmers. And yes there was theatre and music to inspire and fill the soul. As odd as this may sound, I don't think I ever saw a picture of what I would have considered a traditional classroom. And what were the results? Within a century, the United States had become a world leader in agriculture and manufacturing ... and the arts. We not only fed ourselves and our growing population, we fed the world. We not only made things, we were the place to come for the latest in creative ideas and where these ideas were put into practice. So much so that it is estimated that eighty-five per cent of our economic growth was because of our ability to create and make things. At our peak in the middle of the last century, we were exporting roughly seven times what we were importing in finished goods. And I have included arts and entertainment in that number. Today, 50-60 years later we are back where we started in 1862 (except in arts and entertainment) and the greatest percentage growth in exports has been in, you guessed it ... scrap. When I lived in Houston I was invited to the largest (Texas speak) container port in the US. Ships came in laden with finished goods like electronics, computers, phones, and video game consoles; but on the tour someone had the audacity to ask what they left with. The answer; scrap for ballast, but the guide went on to note that we are running out of scrap so they are designing collapsible containers now. How did we get to this point? Somewhere in the last 150 years, we as a nation lost our way ... and that includes us in education.

Although America's higher education system is still considered the model for the world, in our own country it is looked at as overly costly, no longer as a valued public good, a private benefit that has only limited, not transformational, value in our tough economic times. Cost is pointed out as having grown beyond the middle

class's ability to pay. Demographics in many regions are shifting because jobs are not available for ourselves and our kids. At the core is the belief by a growing group of taxpayers and legislators that the education we provide is no longer as relevant or as impactful as it should be, and I think they just might be right. Or, perhaps better put, we may not be getting the message out there. At the inner core of all this turmoil is something very simple. I as a taxpayer am hurting, the economy is not growing, I am working harder for less money; why should I be paying for an education for someone else's kids when I can barely make ends meet myself; ... what is this higher education going to do for me and for my kids? Personally, like you, I would say everything. But with all the news articles questioning the value proposition for higher education, the talk of high salaries (they don't know much about Plymouth), concern about what is being taught, and the cost of education, we are on the defensive rather than being what we are — the best hope and investment for the future.

In summary, we somehow have lost the connection between what we are doing in higher education and the impact it is having on everyone's everyday life and we as a nation are struggling because we are no longer the leading producer in creating and making things the world wants.

Now, before anyone says, we're not a research university, or a technical school; I would say, you are right. I am not trying to make us one. The revolution in our economy and higher education that is sweeping the nation is different than that of 150 years ago and the only case I am making is that we have to be responsive to that change. The change means that each discipline has tremendous value not just traditional STEM fields. Creativity and pulling knowledge together across disciplines is what is important. Transformative discoveries and societal needs are occurring between and across disciplines. Those of you who have read some of my papers know that I have called this the "knowledge in action economy." I'm not sure that is the best descriptor, but I do know that more than ever, we need to be focused on where we fit in creating an innovative future where we build on the uniqueness of what we are in partnership with the incredible region of which we are a part. We need to be interdisciplinary, collaborative, and value engaged scholarship, which I think we do here at Plymouth in many ways already. Looking over the history of Plymouth, I don't think there are many places that value these qualities as much as we do. Our motto *Ut prosim* is lived in the actions of students, staff, and faculty. Much of what the research faculty are doing is engaged research solving real world problems in the region. But there is more to it than we are currently doing and we need focus.

There is that word focus again. If we think of ourselves as a regional comprehensive university in a time when knowledge is crossing so many boundaries, and we will stay primarily discipline based, we will proliferate majors in an attempt to address the explosion in areas of study. In an environment of limited state funding, we will bankrupt ourselves and work ourselves to distraction, all the while falling behind. This is because the knowledge of the twenty-first century knows no boundaries. In fact, it has been said that all the challenges of the twenty-first century are and will be interdisciplinary in nature. We will never be able to create all the new majors that are needed to address the need. So let's stop doing things the way we always have been and think about what we need to be like to match the needs of this century, while staying true to what we are. I think that is part of the reason there is growing concern among the populace. Our nation is desperate for an answer to our growing economic malaise and they sense the apparent disconnect between the traditional structure in universities and what is seen today as a relevant education for an economy that falters and sputters along.

For example, there is much concern and discussion today about the relevance of a Liberal Arts education. Why is that? I think it is because the nation is confused about what a liberal education is. And to some extent we are responsible. We split things up into disciplines and then layered on top general education requirements and perhaps lost sight of the big picture ... and so did our students. We've got to put things back together again. If you look at the seven foundational pillars of the liberal arts, every one has incredible relevance to the world around us and interaction with that world. Together they historically provided an integrated picture of how everything fit together and provided the tools to be a well-educated contributor in a thoughtful, dynamic, and creative society. Take for instance geometry; it is the application of science and mathematics to the creation of structures. Today one might even call it technology or engineering. Rhetoric and grammar are the ability to argue a point, to persuade, to convince others, to learn through interaction and discussion to find the best idea, to create a beautiful story or write a proposal. Astronomy and biology involve understanding our makeup and discovery of the world around us and how it works. Mathematics gives us the tools to enable and codify those discoveries. And music allows us to express how we feel. I could go on but you get the idea ... even if you might not agree with me.

Stephen Jay Gould, the famed evolutionary biologist wrote in *The Hedgehog, the Fox, and the Magister's Pox* of the key role the approaches and the methodologies, so developed in the humanities and the arts, particularly the idea of synthesis of ideas and perspectives from multiple sources play in the process of discovery.

I say all this so you will understand that no matter what area your study or interest, you are a part of where we are going. And that includes both faculty and staff. But we must have context and focus across our disciplines. We are not turning into a career school, but we are turning into a place where students can come to find a career that transforms themselves and their world no matter what their interest or background. We will be a high impact university and no one will wonder what our mission and vision is or whether it is relevant to their daily lives. And that includes our legislators and taxpayers. But we need to develop some tools and find a place to start. We need

to have focus. You have already begun this process with URSA and in recruiting and philanthropy. You should be very proud of what you have done and that you are doing it together. There are few places anywhere in education where this kind of comprehensive analysis and all-inclusive participation has occurred. And don't doubt its value. It will serve to guide us as we move forward.

But how might we use the knowledge from these reports to develop a cohesive plan for the future? That is what we are here to talk about today. This is a complex, uneven and challenging process but the work has already started and our goal is to build on the foundation already in place.

Why do I say that? I have observed in organizations when leadership changes that the organization sometimes swings in differing directions. With the pace of leadership changes today that can make progress difficult. That is not what we are about moving forward. There are great roots here, we just need to grow the tree. We need focus and vision and it needs to be consistent, relevant, and coherent.

In that light, some of you know that we had a retreat over the summer, to begin to look at how we can build on URSA and the great legacy of Plymouth for service and engagement. If you weren't there, don't worry, we weren't excluding you. You will all have a chance to provide input. But coming from the outside I needed a place to start so that the journey we begin today would be grounded in what Plymouth is about, not what I think it is about.

So let me start with a framework that came out of our retreat to begin our discussion of where we see ourselves in 5-10 years. As many of you know, I have been working on the challenge of how to pull disciplines together and to provide an interdisciplinary focus for at least 15 -20 years. The approach or mechanism that I have found has worked best is to establish what I and others call strategic clusters. What are clusters?

If I were to give a definition, I would say clusters or hubs are non-threatening, collaborative and flexible structures that bring together disciplines in a coherent and thoughtful manner to address the process of discovery, education, innovation and growth in knowledge in the twenty-first century. A lot of words I know, but clusters facilitate branding of a university and inform community engagement while advancing the university and the region into national and international distinction in unique areas of interdisciplinary and disciplinary study. They organize and focus our energy, give us direction for growth, connect with students, alumni, donors, retirees and taxpayers, and provide thematic approaches to general education while guiding us in investments. They will be the way we are known to the global, state and local community and they are pillars of excellence that allow us to frame within them adaptable programs of study that are coincident with a theme that is critical for the future. Together, clusters form a university that becomes an open laboratory, a place where transdisciplinary ideas flourish across disciplines, community and business. These "laboratories" are open spaces that allow faculty, students, alumni, retirees and community to interact in innovative and creative ways. Indeed — an open laboratory is really the actualization of research clusters in the creation of an integrative learning and discovery environment. In an open laboratory, the processes of education and research come together in a seamless path, from discovery to implementation.

In understanding clusters and then open laboratories, one might think of it as a combination of the innovative approaches you have already been developing in the arts and the Enterprise Center. For example, it is not hard to imagine an arts and technology cluster focused on creating and making things that is established in an open laboratory space where computer scientists, artists, English students, scientists, musicians, communications and business majors and others come together to create environments that visualize information, develop aids for discovery, create interactive media, tell stories, develop training scenarios, new product designs, and novel and intuitive interfaces for man/machine interaction. The possibilities are endless as are the disciplines involved.

Just think, what kind of environment this could create around the University? How would it build on the expertise that is already here? We live in a beautiful location where others would love to live. The mills are gone and the furniture business struggles. Our kids are leaving. Can you imagine how transformative this could be? And think about our new ALLWell North building. It could form the center of a cluster and be the open laboratory home for a cluster in health, performance and human enrichment.

So how might we envision this? At the end of the retreat, we got together to brainstorm on what Plymouth might be. This vision statement is a rough draft of what came out of that session and a place to begin in thinking about ourselves.

Plymouth State University is a visionary institution at the hub of a growing creative community where students, faculty, staff and alumni are actively transforming themselves and their region into global leaders in distinctive clusters of excellence through interdisciplinary and entrepreneurial experiential learning and innovative partnerships.

It's a mouthful, but let's take it apart a little at a time.

First, Plymouth State is about transformation. Not just of our students, but ourselves and the community in which we serve and in which our students will work. Change is the constant in the world in which we are living. We can stay ahead of it and ride the wave or resist it and be washed over. We can be frustrated by our inability to keep up or by

riding the wave, be full of focused and reinforcing energy. You have only to read *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, or books like Michael Crow's *Designing the New American University* to realize our landscape is shifting dramatically. There will be winners and losers. And as our Athletic Director Kim Bownes has noted, "who doesn't want to be a winner?"

We are part of a great community; we need it and this place and it needs us, as we play on the international stage. We play off of each other to create greater strengths than we have alone.

Second, we are not a regional comprehensive university, despite how we are classified by the higher education marketplace. We can't be all things to all people ... at least not in the traditional sense, and still be really good at anything on a national and international level. And that is the only level in play right now. Competition is global not local. So building areas of focus and concentration are really important. It is how students and the community will know us and how we will know ourselves.

Third, there is this idea of interdisciplinarity, something that Plymouth is increasingly being recognized for. It doesn't threaten our disciplinary organization, it builds on it to tie us together in ways that are creative and adaptive to the challenges ahead. It allows us to develop unique strengths and integrate our general education into themed constructs related to a cluster study area.

Fourth, in this world of transformation and change, new opportunities abound and entrepreneurial thinking is a requirement to take advantage of what comes our way.

And finally, experiential learning requires innovative partnerships with the community, our colleagues and the environment around us. It reinforces what is learned in the classroom and addresses the needs of a generation of hands on and interactive learners. It provides students with the tools to succeed, funding while in school, and a connection that increases retention up to 100 percent.

At the retreat, we also went on to get try to conceive of what the clusters might be for Plymouth State. We came up with several, which revolve around tourism, the environment, human enrichment, discovery and innovation, and Justice and Security. I'm not going to list all of them, but I will tell you there were no shortage of ideas. Today and over the next several weeks, we need to work together to fine tune the thinking and make some decisions about what topics, or clusters, we will focus on.

Let me just give you two examples of clusters I can share with you from other universities of which I have been a part. We could never make our clusters quite as broad here, but Houston, like Texas, is big and we needed Texas size clusters so we picked Energy and Health. We teamed with the largest medical center in the world and the renewable and oil and gas industries around Houston. We set up clusters within clusters that focused on areas in which we might gain international recognition. The result was transformative. In four years we moved from a university sometimes known as "Cougar High" to a tier one university alongside the two flagships of UT and Texas A&M. And these weren't just research endeavors, they guided our educational programs and resulted in the formation of broad tracks of interdisciplinary study.

Let me give you another example of a cluster and how an open lab might be developed here at Plymouth State. Students and faculty from the Center for Active Living, Health and Human Performance, and Nursing might form the basis of a cluster in health, performance and human enrichment. I know that Healthy PSU and the Center for Active Living are already doing work around healthy eating and the positive impact being active has on health. What if students and faculty from marketing, graphic design, the Center for Rural Partnerships, and Communication studies joined them in the cluster to work together on how to impact health related behaviors? Students and faculty from HHP and Nursing might develop content, educational materials, and workshops. Students and faculty from Graphic Design and Communication Studies might help the content developers create web-based videos and interactive content. Students in Health or PE, Adventure Ed, and the Center for Active Living might organize programming and activities. Students in psychology and in marketing might help develop marketing materials tailored at behavioral changes. This cluster might develop research areas around health, healthcare, behavioral changes, and marketing in this field. I could go on, but hopefully you are starting to get the picture and maybe even beginning to think about how students from your disciplines, along with yourselves could contribute to a cluster.

Now a little bit about timeframe and impact on what we all do. I am pretty ambitious about the timeframe and I don't want to get everyone too excited. I realize we can't do all this tomorrow. This transformation is one that will take place over multiple years. But for the coming year we should set some goals of getting together to explore the areas in which we will form clusters. I'm not suggesting we have a lot of extra meetings or load ourselves down with yet another task. I am suggesting that we start talking about it in small groups and in our department and divisional meetings and we begin the process of exploring how things might fit together. As the results come from the URSA process, we will then be able to inform some of our ideas with the data that is being collected. Rather than deciding to cut areas, maybe it is better to combine those areas into a growing interdisciplinary cluster — or shift resources and ourselves into areas that will form the core of these transdisciplinary endeavors. Then we can look at how we organize our coursework and theme our general education endeavors so they support clusters. We can also develop open laboratory spaces where people come together and work on projects – students, faculty and

community. Next fall, we could start to implement a broad framework for clusters and begin to market the clusters to our incoming class of students, donors and the community. In four years, through evolution of our programs, we should begin to think of ourselves in these terms with structure, organization and branding. Recruiting and counseling will be tied to clusters and we will have developed a strong relationship with external stakeholders that are engaging our students and faculty in open laboratories.

I could say much more but let me just close by saying, we are here today because I think you realize things cannot stay the way they are. Through your hard work, conservation of resources, recruiting, fundraising, salary freezes and pulling together, we have a new opportunity to create a future for our students, for ourselves, and for our community. It will not be easy, and the pain is not over. But we'll not waste your effort and we will come out of this not only as a survivor, but a leader in higher education. I have been in this position before and I am confident of the steps we need to take. We are nimble and we are together. We have the largest entering class in our history and the best place to live, I want to give you hope that as tough as it has been and will be for a while, we have a path forward and the tools to lead us to a bright future. I am excited by what lies ahead and I hope you are too. We will be the hope for the North Country and much more, for our students and our alumni around the world.

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