

Good morning:

First, I want to thank our friends at Florida State University for the wonderful welcome and hospitality. The leadership combination of Chair Peter Collins and President Rick McCollough is one we can all be proud of. President McCullough, you have proven yourself to be a leader worthy of an institution as great as Florida State. When faced with the challenge of violence on your campus, whether the potential for harmful encampments or an actual shooting, you didn't hide from the challenge or make excuses. You leaned in, you owned it, you confronted it. Leadership is easy when it's easy. You showed how a leader acts when it's hard.

I also want to thank the members of the Board of Governors who preceded each of us. We all stand on the shoulders of those who come before us, and I am particularly grateful for those who served with courage and chose not to bend when it would have been easy to. And, I want to welcome our new, recently appointed members, each of whom brings their own experience and wisdom to our mutual work.

We enter 2026 as the undisputed #1 System of higher education in the country – a distinction we have held since 2017. The recognitions are too numerous to list here, and much of the data is before you in our annual report. Instead of using my time to recite what you can read for yourselves, I'd like to share my perspective about why we are here.

Nothing is more objective about success than the results of a competitive marketplace in higher education, and the market has spoken loudly about Florida. At the University of Florida, we saw this year what could be as many as 100,000 applicants. At Florida State, more than 88,000, at FIU, more than 40,000. At USF, more than 71,000. And at New College, they've achieved record enrollment with an average GPA of 4.0. Students aren't choosing our universities merely because of metrics or rankings. They are choosing our universities because of the underlying quality and value of the educational experience and the degrees we produce.

For example, the University of South Florida being admitted to AAU was a landmark moment in our System's history, as it's the first since UF was admitted back while I was a student. USF's ascension from a commuter school 30 years ago to one of America's AAU powerhouse universities underscores the seriousness of our efforts to educate our students and to conduct world-class research that contributes to our economy and to our world.

We didn't get here by doing things the way the formerly elite academic institutions did things. We chose to make college more accessible and affordable by freezing tuition a decade ago and challenging ourselves to become more efficient. Others chose a different path – increasing costs of a degree, and saddling graduates with more than \$1.8 TRILLION in debt. In Florida, more than  $\frac{3}{4}$  of our students graduate with no debt at all, and as a System, we have among the lowest student debt loads in the nation. At \$6,300/year, our annual tuition is about half of the national average. In Florida, we embarked upon efforts to focus on the importance of civil discourse, Western values, and

high-quality STEM education. Other systems and universities that call themselves elite chose to prioritize curriculum infused with ideology and identity. The results? Our four-year graduation rates are up to 66%, while the national average is 46%. 75% of our bachelor's degree graduates are employed or continuing their education – earning a median wage of \$51,000 one year after graduation. Some universities have allowed ideology to sink its teeth into some of the most basic parts of their campuses – even into places like math and elementary education. Perhaps this is why, when students on many of these so-called elite college campuses marched in favor of terrorists and targeted the safety of fellow Americans/Jews on their campus, the leadership of the universities found themselves frozen – incapable of leading right when leadership was needed most. In Florida, our university leadership said no to bringing fear to our campuses, and we protected our students. In a recent national survey of Jewish college students, 83% reported experiencing anti-semitism, including being targeted, excluded, or harassed for their beliefs. In Florida, that rate is nearly 50% lower – indicating the effectiveness of our policies, while underscoring there is more work to do. While some education leaders have promoted identity and race-driven admissions processes, we in Florida focused on merit while at the same time improving access for deserving students who otherwise might not have been able to afford an education, regardless of race. That's why our Pell grant graduation rates are among the best in the nation. It's why, in an area of great need, our nursing board pass rates are 94% - above the national average. Our HBCU, FAMU, is the #1 public HBCU in the nation. We have 71 National Academy members, and we've dedicated over \$200 million over the past two years for recruitment and retention of world-class faculty.

And for the 8<sup>th</sup> consecutive year, five of our institutions earned placements on the National Academy of Inventors Top 100 US and worldwide University lists (UF, USF, UCF, FIU, FSU). And we've exceeded \$3 billion in research, a first in our history, and an ambitious goal set during my time as chair of the research committee just a few years ago.

So, back to why our 431,000 students choose our universities. The success we've had in becoming the most sought-after institutions in America was no accident, and make no mistake, we are not immune to the things that can rot an institution from the inside. Here in Florida, YES, some of our universities were teaching aspiring elementary school teachers Inclusive Math, Gender and sexuality, and pedagogy designed around the very indoctrination none of us thought we'd be teaching our teachers to teach our children. Thanks to the work of our Education Commissioners and Legislature, this type of indoctrination of our future elementary school teachers is being changed.

But this example of how curriculum, hidden in the shadows, demonstrates how insidious it can be when we take our eyes off of what is important, and the product we are really trying to deliver. That product is knowledge, the ability to think critically and not be told what to think, the ability to draw conclusions based on facts and values, rather than being afraid to challenge ideas and concepts that differ from your perspective. The confidence in your technical, professional, and linguistic ability to leave the university setting and become among the most sought-after next generation of engineers, scientists, doctors, lawyers, and thought leaders. THAT is our product.

The tension between classical liberalism and conservatism has endured as bedrocks of higher education since Jefferson. And so, this tension is not the enemy of education – it's the reason for it.

The issue choice we must make is: are we committed to graduating students who believe in the bedrock American principles of merit, capitalism, and lifting people out of poverty through the power of their own ideas and capabilities, OR, are we satisfied graduating students who believe in Socialism.

As recently as October, a new poll of College Students by Axios and The Generation Lab proved the point of my concern:

- 67% of students held a positive or neutral opinion of the word "socialism", compared with only 40% holding the same view about capitalism.
- Another poll by Yale found that nearly 40% of college students said physical violence can be justified to prevent a person from "spewing hate". You don't need to look far to see the manifestation of this. Just turn on the television.
- That same poll found that 33% of students said Palestine is a better US Ally, and 29% said Israel is the better friend.

As Lauren Noble, the director of the William F Buckley Institute at Yale said: "America's colleges and Universities still have a lot of work to do." And she went on to say that, while there is cause for hope, it is clear American higher education is in trouble."

She is not wrong.

The very foundation of the economic system that has lifted more people around the world from poverty, cured more disease, solved more problems and improved the human condition is under threat if our System of higher education doesn't do its basic job. Rankings and awards matter not if we lose the very foundation of our economic and social systems because higher education failed to honor what our founders envisioned. This is not a side issue: It is the issue of our time.

In the 250<sup>th</sup> year of our country, now seems a good time to reinvigorate our efforts to recognize our place as institutions that are the guardrails of liberty. Those who tilt the education experience to be partial to the building blocks of communism and socialism often fail to teach that these systems have led to as many as 100 million deaths, ranging from executions to famine, forced labor to deportations.

Grifting, consolidation of power, death and suffering are not the byproducts of socialism. **THEY ARE THE REASON FOR IT.** It is easy for people to dismiss this as merely a political issue. But it's not, and it has consequences. Indoctrination has been on our campuses for decades and pushing back to make sure our students are given the opportunity to truly learn about the differences is the least we can do for them. **WE** must trust our students to be able to draw their own conclusions, but we owe it to them to make sure they are given all the information.

It is known that as much as 20% of college rankings include “reputational scores” as judged by university presidents in other states. I would surmise that maybe our approach to higher education in Florida might not be popular with the very academic leaders who have brought us \$1.8 trillion in student debt, graduates who favor socialism, and students who believe a terrorist regime is preferable to a Western democracy. If given the choice between performing for them or making sure our students graduate with clear heads about their futures, I choose our students every time, without exception.

In that light, in front of you is a gift from me. It's a short story book. In it is a story called “A Message to Garcia”. It was a gift from Governor Jeb Bush when I joined his administration. This story was written in 1899, and while some of the language is a bit harsh due to its time, the story itself is timeless. As it goes, President McKinley was attempting to get a message to the opposition leader – Garcia - in Cuba during the Spanish-American War. Obviously, that wasn't an easy thing to do back then. He was offered up a young soldier named Rowan who would deliver the message. President McKinley wrote the message, and the young soldier left, delivering the message weeks later. The story accentuates how innovation, entrepreneurship, problem-solving, and critical thinking saved the moment. You see, Rowan didn't stop to ask who Garcia was. He didn't ask President McKinley why the message needed to be delivered. He didn't protest the harsh conditions or the risk he was being asked to take. He didn't ask for suggestions on HOW to map out a path to Garcia. He didn't wait for government bureaucracy to make the rules and tell him what he was and wasn't allowed to do, or how many hours he could work. He was left to his own ingenuity. He took the message, and he figured it out. The author, even back in 1899, is drawing the distinction between the idea behind capitalism and why socialism doesn't work. The person who risks everything to start a business. The person who doesn't sleep because he stands to lose everything. The person who wakes up each day because she is determined to succeed. Every one of our graduates needs to be equipped to understand these core values.

And so, what does this mean to us as board members? WE are the messengers. WE are Rowan. Our students are President McKinley, tasking us to be the entrepreneurs, risk takers, and thought leaders who will make sure they are equipped with what they need in order to be successful. That we have more applicants for admission to our System than we have ever had indicates THEY TRUST US to be the messengers; to deliver on the promise they will be safe; they will learn what they need to learn in order to achieve their economic and personal dreams; they will leave the universities prepared to contribute to our society and to our republic in a meaningful way; they will leave the universities with the confidence they have invested several years of their lives on something that will generate a lifetime of returns on that investment.

Colleagues, I ask you.... use the opportunity you've been given by Governor DeSantis and the Legislature to BE THE MESSENGER.

Now, in the spirit of Civil Discourse, it's fair to point out that there is an alternative viewpoint to a Message to Garcia. And there has been criticism of it. That's ok. I read their discourse, and while I choose to believe the message in A Message to Garcia, it seems

appropriate to lead by example as leaders of our System, and to share with you the paper criticizing it. And just as we hope happens on our campuses, you can read both sides and decide for yourself what your takeaway is. But you are being given the information.

So, besides some of these core issues that stand before us, what are some of the priorities I think we should have dialogue about over the coming year?

**Accreditation:** Florida led the fight to provide our institutions with options for accreditation. And our Chancellor has worked with other ascending elite institutions from other states to develop the new Commission for Public Higher Education. As of November, 10 institutions have submitted Letters of Intent to seek accreditation. And here in Florida, our Attorney General, James Uthemeier, successfully sought and received Supreme Court backing to remove the lock the Bar Association has had on who can accredit law schools. Continuing this important effort, I am asking Chancellor Rodrigues to work with the Academic Excellence and Economic Growth Committee, led by Governor Good, to evaluate accreditation standards for medical schools. Physicians produced by medical schools must be of the highest competence. We need to learn what the standards are for admission, curriculum, and outcomes. IF they are anything but merit-based, Florida should consider its options.

**Student Safety:** We saw firsthand the tragedy of students and faculty becoming human targets on one of our campuses. I recall the day President McCollough called me to tell me they were in the midst of a shooting on the campus at FSU, it was one of the darkest days during my tenure on this board. The board chair of FSU and the President worked as a team to put the students first. Our chancellor took advantage of the opportunity to learn what had occurred by assembling a summit. And that summit bore results. Governor DeSantis included funding in his recommended budget to improve student safety, and wise leaders in the House and Senate have filed bills (Salzman and Gaetz) to support our efforts. The safety of our students is our highest priority. That is why I'm asking the Board to join me in establishing a student safety and success committee, which I have appointed Ashley Bell Barnett to lead. And as a first, I'm appointing our student representative, Carson Dale, to serve as Vice Chair – a tradition I hope continues. President Dale, himself, experienced the violence resulting from Iran/Hamas attacks on Israel, as he was leading students through Israel when the 12-day war began. I communicated with Carson and was inspired by his courage and thoughtfulness toward his fellow students. We are truly fortunate to have Carson on our Board and to now have him in a position of leadership.

**AI and Cybersecurity:** There are literally billions of devices connected to the internet in the United States, providing an opportunity for both the flow of information as well as an opportunity for AI to penetrate every aspect of our interactions. As the Florida legislature considers the AI Bill of Rights, it is important that we acknowledge that, with this high degree of connectivity, the introduction of AI presents opportunities and challenges beyond our current comprehension. Dario Amodei is the founder of a \$350 billion AI company, Anthropic. He warns that two things are true: For the security of our nation, we must not allow China to control the advancement of AI. He says that permitting that to

happen would “make as much sense as selling nuclear weapons to North Korea and bragging that the missile casings are made by Boeing.” He calls for democracies to maintain AI supremacy because the alternative is AI-enabled totalitarianism that humanity would not be able to escape from. He also predicts 10-20% GDP growth alongside AI, displacing 50% of entry-level white-collar jobs in the next 1-5 years, half of entry-level knowledge work. The bottom line is this...AI models are psychologically complex and can be destructive for reasons that may be unpredictable.

Our universities lead in the areas of AI. I point to the creation of the Bellini College of Artificial Intelligence, Cybersecurity, and Computing at USF – and the vision of “CyberBay” as an example where our universities can take lead, not only in the opportunities for AI, but also in developing the type of governance standards that are needed to bring order to it.

As AI is being integrated into the curriculum throughout our System, we need to understand the opportunities and risks. I am proposing the formation of an AI/CyberSecurity Task Force to work with the Legislature and Governor on the implementation of the AI Bill of Rights, and I have asked Ed Haddock to lead this task force. As one of the leaders of the AI technology space has said, this technology is 1-2 years from matching human capability across the board, that governance is the binding constraint, and that his own AI models exhibit concerning psychological complexity, making the stakes civilizational. I was invited recently to participate in a strategic planning session around AI by the University of Colorado System, and one of my takeaways was that four guard rails must exist as universities stake our place with AI: RESPECT FOR PRIVACY, ENSURING ITS ETHICAL USE, THERE IS BROAD UNDERSTANDING OF THE RISK, and ITS USE IS SECURE. The work of this task force will be important in helping to understand the impact of AI on our students and how we protect our universities and students from its unintended consequences.

**Intercollegiate Athletics:** Like many people in this room, I am an avid fan of college sports, and I have a special love for my college team. But college sports are not what they were only a few years ago. To some of us, that’s a good thing. To others, it feels like the wild west. Last year, we were asked to authorize our universities to open their auxiliaries, so they could fund up to \$22 million annually to cover the revenue-sharing authorized by the legal settlement. But this is not the end of it. While our regulation has a sunset, the financial implications will continue beyond that sunset. We have asked the universities to develop plans, and they are. We have seen tens of millions of dollars being used to pay coaches, and in some cases, to pay coaches not to coach. We’ve now seen that, among the 2021 class of high school football quarterback recruits, 8 of the top 10 quarterbacks entered the transfer portal. Studies of elite quarterback recruits showed that 126 out of 168 transferred. I’m not saying this is good or bad. What I am saying is that our collegiate programs are becoming semi-professional, if not professional. I don’t know what this means for the future of college sports, but I do know there’s a lot of money involved, and we need better visibility into our universities’ plans. I have proposed the formation of the Intercollegiate Athletics Task Force, led by Ken Jones, and I’ve taken the unprecedented step of appointing non-BOG members to this task force, including Trustee Chairs and

Athletic Directors, to help us learn and lean into this. I also want to point out that intercollegiate athletics is highly competitive, and I've asked the Chancellor to do everything possible to protect competitively sensitive information. If necessary, we may ask the legislature to provide help in protecting information that could be used by other state universities and competitors to harm our great institutions.

**Budget:** Last year, we implemented budget metrics to look at the balance sheets of our universities and to begin to prepare ourselves for a time when the legislature may have priorities that are outsized to the revenue available to them. We have been very fortunate to have the investment we've had for our institutions over the past decade. We haven't squandered it. We've kept tuition low, we've made some hard decisions about academic programs that may not have had the ROI necessary to keep them in place, and we've been far more transparent about how we use public money. But that's not enough. I'm asking Vice Chair Tim Cerio, who chairs our Budget and Finance Committee, to work with our System CFOs to prepare for what the various scenarios might be for university funding given different out-year state budget scenarios, and I'm asking Tim to work with Facilities Chair Ken Jones on a strategy for deferred maintenance funding. I'm also asking that we take lead in using AI to evaluate physical space to determine actual use and whether there are alternatives to new construction that better utilize existing space.

These are a few priorities I think we will need to dig into this coming year. As I look around the room, at our board members, trustee leaders and presidents, it is no surprise to me that we are the #1 System in America. I see entrepreneurs, innovators, leaders and genuinely good people. Whatever the challenges are, I know we are up to the task.

Thank you each for your service, and God bless you all.