

PRESIDENT LISA VOLLENDORF PH.D. INAUGURAL SPEECH

March 23, 2023

Thank you, Chancellor King. Thank you to all members of the platform party, our Foundation Board, our University Council, and to the audience for being here to celebrate with us today.

I am deeply honored by the opportunity to serve as the sixth president of SUNY Empire State and the first president of Empire State University.

We stand alone at Empire State University in so many ways, and not just because we are the only university that can claim Peter Parker (a.k.a., Spider Man) as an alum.

SUNY Empire has, from the very beginning, been devoted to the singular—and singularly challenging—mission of serving learners who otherwise would not have the opportunity to attend college. We have, from the beginning, been devoted to finding ways to meet students where they are. At our very core, we are inclusive, creative, and innovative.

The leadership of our past presidents—all of whom are with us today—has helped us stay the course, always striving to do better in service to this access mission. All of our past presidents are here today, so I ask you to please join me in thanking them: Jim Malatras, Merodie Hancock, Alan Davis, Joe Moore, and our founding president, Jim Hall.

This steadfast commitment to access, inclusion, flexibility, and innovation embodied by these presidents and our entire community over the past decades drew me to SUNY Empire. I am so glad I kept taking the calls from the presidential recruiter, who urged me to learn more and to connect the dots between the current reach and the potential future impact of this institution on students, their families, and their communities.

The more I learned, the more I wanted to be part of SUNY Empire's future.

I have worked at many fine universities, all of which serve a richly diverse student population. And I have had the privilege of teaching and advising students from different backgrounds, including:

- A student whose parents owned an island (I did teach while attending the University of Pennsylvania for grad school after all);
- Students raised in deep poverty and surrounded by violence in Detroit;
- Students who were immigrants and who were, in many cases, brought across the U.S. border by parents risking everything so their children could have a better life;
- Students who juggle parenthood, caretaking, work, health issues, financial challenges, and school.

And I always learn more from students than I think they ever learn from me.

But I have never worked at an institution that has such a clearly distinctive role to play in helping public higher education be more accessible, more flexible, and more inclusive.

SUNY Empire was born out of a democratizing vision; a vision that called for an institution that would, and I quote, “transcend constraints of space, place, and time.” One that “represents an expression of faith in a more hopeful future...in which higher education can open new paths of learning and fulfillment to every individual ... in New York.” President Hall, if those words sound familiar, it is because you wrote them in your “Prospectus for a New College” in 1971.

Today we gather in honor of that vision, holding dear the promise of an ever more hopeful, more equitable, more just future.

And we gather knowing that SUNY Empire exists to strengthen the very fabric of our society, to bring education to all corners not just of the state but of the globe, as we continue to build on that original expression of faith in the power of public higher education.

We stand alone at SUNY Empire in our ability to educate individuals at all stages of life, many of whom believed their chance to attend college had vanished when they took a job or had a child or moved away or joined the military.

And we stand alone in our ability to deliver high-quality, affordable education that builds on students’ own knowledge and life experience.

But most importantly, we stand in solidarity with our colleagues at campuses across SUNY, ready to help SUNY reach and retain more students and to help those students persist to graduation.

Empire State University is poised to be the completion arm of SUNY, driving upward mobility and economic development in ways we have only just begun to imagine at our institution and in our state. Together with our SUNY partners, we can help students complete their degrees. We can more seamlessly serve SUNY’s military students who get transferred or deployed away from their home institutions. And we can do this because we are adaptive and we are innovative.

No other state approaches retention and completion in this way, but, in collaboration with our SUNY colleagues, we can break new ground. Together with our sister institutions, we can drive access, upward mobility, and economic development in a more inclusive, more holistic, more results-driven way than has ever been done before in public higher education.

In that vein, I am pleased to announce that we are launching two new initiatives that build on the success of our existing—and very strong—opportunity programs:

- The Presidential Scholars Program will offer \$1,000 recruitment and retention scholarships annually for up to 4 years to students transferring with their associate degree.
- Our Military Opportunity Program will provide wrap-around support in a cohort model for military affiliated students. SUNY Empire serves more military students than any other four-year institution in the state. We are proud to continue to find ways to do this work better for more veterans, active service members, and military family members.

Both programs will serve people too often left behind by traditional student success efforts. And both will be important fundraising platforms, helping us continue to put students first in our quest for additional funding from individuals, granting agencies, and foundations.

So yes, in case you hadn't noticed, I am excited to be here at Empire State University.

I am so glad I chose to make the journey with my adventurous husband from the land of sunshine, redwoods, wintertime citrus, and local Pinot Noir to the great state of New York.

Like all journeys, this one would not have been possible without the help of many people.

I have been so very fortunate to have the encouragement and love of family and friends, including:

- My parents, who worked six and, often, seven days a week for years to raise four rambunctious children. They raised my amazing brothers and me to be good and do good in the world. Theirs is parenting in its purest form: loving all four of us for who we are.
- My husband and life partner, Scott.
 - Scott, thank you for your love and for your friendship.
 - Thank you for sharing your limitless thirst for exploration that has taken us up many mountains (sometimes up the wrong one, in fact!), across many rivers, and out—way out—to remote places where caribou and bears sometimes outnumber people.
 - You make me better in all ways every day, and I am so proud to be on your team.
- My stepson Max made the trip up from Manhattan to join us today.
 - Max, you have always—in your uniquely YOU way—been there for us and with us, always pushing us to expand our understanding of the world.
 - (As an FYI, the first question Max posed to me when he was ten was, “Who is your favorite Roman emperor?” I rest my case!)
- My oldest academic friends, Denise and Nieves, whose friendship has nurtured me since we were first making our way as new assistant professors;
- My inspiring friend Pat, who returned this year to her home state of New York to help me get settled and, as an added bonus, got to experience her beloved San Gennaro festival once again;
- My dear California friends [Joyce and Shannon; Stan and Julie; Vivi, Christian, and Henry; Elias and Esther; Elaine and Elna; Michael and Alex] from whom I have learned more about laughter and love (ok, also about crisis management and cocktails) than I ever could have hoped to learn in one life;
- I am thankful to all of the students I had in my Spanish classrooms over the years, who always reminded me that education is a privilege to be treasured and shared;
- and I am grateful to the many academic leaders, coaches, and colleagues from whom I have learned—and continue to learn—the importance of empathy, compassion, curiosity, collaboration, and joy.

I am truly filled with gratitude for the chance to work with so many accomplished, dedicated colleagues here at Empire State University.

All of us share an abiding commitment to serving our students to the best of our ability. And we express that commitment through creative pedagogy, holistic support, and a focus on continuous improvement. I am honored, too, to work within the powerfully impactful system that is the State University of New York under Chancellor King's leadership.

In short, I am humbled and grateful to serve as the president of Empire State University, where we have, since 1971, enacted three basic principles:

- Educate.
- Innovate.
- Elevate.

We have come a long way in these past 52 years ... and I know that the best is yet to come.

Thank you!