

## Opening Faculty and Staff Meeting, Aug. 17, 2022

President's Address by Christopher F. Roellke, PhD

I have a simple message this morning, and my simple message is this: "Stetson is back. Stetson is back."

It is so energizing to have our campus alive again as our community comes back together for the 2022-2023 academic year. I would like to thank the many members of our faculty and staff who helped all the new families of our community this past Saturday. Drop-off day is absolutely one of my favorite days of the year. As I exited the President's House on Saturday to make my way over to the Lynn Business Center parking lot, I was immediately energized by the tremendous excitement permeating campus, as we welcomed well over 800 members of our community and parents, siblings, extended family and loved ones, and a whole host of other good friends to our beloved university.

Let me be clear, the student class of '26, and all our students, need our love, need our patience and need our guidance as we all seek to overcome adversity.

In a recent white paper on the pandemic's effect on higher education, the Educational Advisory Board, also known as EAB, reports the following:

"52% of students reported having far less opportunity to socialize during the pandemic, and 75% of students indicated the pandemic has worsened their mental health. This group of young people has also experienced unfinished secondary school learning, with an estimated four to six months of academic learning lost due to the pandemic."

Some other important data points from this report: "Moving forward, more than one-half of bachelor degree recipients will have some community college or junior college credit on their undergraduate transcripts. It is also becoming increasingly easy for this generation of students to transfer from one institution to another, with over one-third of our students likely to transfer, as they seek to transfer their credits — stack their credentials across institutions in order to achieve their undergraduate degrees at the lowest possible cost, and to quickly garner the skills and dispositions demanded by employers."

These data points, in my view, have rather profound implications for our beloved Stetson University, as all of higher education is recalibrating as a result of both the pandemic and the demographic reality of fewer and fewer college students in our pipeline moving forward.

This is precisely why we work so diligently to contemplate our present and our future, and to assert our core priorities, promoting health, well-being, academic achievement and postgraduate success of our students. I want to thank our faculty staff, our alumni and our Board of Trustees for all the important listening sessions, focus groups, webinars, planning interviews and reviews. All of that work has contributed to the institutional priorities that we

will brainstorm this fall. The goal is to have a working draft of these priorities for the Board of Trustees' consideration at the October meeting here on the DeLand campus.

As we reimagine Stetson University over the next five to seven years, we're taking our first steps on this journey we have called "From a Florida gem to national treasure." Our vision quite simply: Stetson University, as Florida's first private university, will reaffirm its excellence in innovation, academic preparation and experiential relationship-rich education. Stetson will become widely recognized as the *top comprehensive small university in the southern United States*.

To support that vision, we have some core priorities that are emerging, which I hope will resonate with each and every one of you.

- We're going to work our tail off to promote relationship-rich education, focused intentionally and holistically on the needs and aspirations of 21st-century students.
- We're going to work our tail off to build healthy, diverse and inclusive communities, where all have this experience of belonging, well-being and transformational personal growth.
- We're going to work our tail off to elevate Stetson's regional and national reputation through a university-wide focus on the student experience and asserting an indefatigable commitment to student retention, graduation and success.
- We're going to work our tail off to ensure that Stetson's greatest assets — it's people — are the centerpiece of having, creating and sustaining multigenerational relationships that last a lifetime and beyond.
- And we are going to steadfastly celebrate Stetson's story. We're going to communicate nationally and internationally, thereby broadening the university's geographic footprint.

We have support strategies that are emerging and resonating with our communities. The student experience is the centerpiece of our strategy. Without our students, Stetson does not exist.

- Enrollment and communication, we're going to work to merge these critical functions and co-locate them to create a synergistic team.
- We're going to modernize and streamline and make our admissions tools more efficient and compelling digitally and visually.
- We're going to create user-friendly and personalized recruiting and admissions tools that build deep connections with prospective students and their families.
- We're going to tell Stetson's relationship-rich and transformational stories more often and more broadly.
- We're going to amplify the voices and experiences of our faculty, our students and our alumni.
- I'm delighted to report that we are going to launch the Center for Public Opinion Research this fall.
- We are going to invest in campus visitation from our prospective students and families, alumni, and the broader DeLand and Tampa communities.

You've heard a little bit about Chaudoin Hall. In some ways that unexpected challenge has been a blessing in disguise, because that building needed work anyway. We're going to conduct a complete residential audit on every single student living complex, and we're going to invest in modernizing those residential spaces with a particular focus on health, safety, well-being and environmental sustainability.

We're also going to reimagine the first-year student experience by creating a mindset and a set of programs that begin at the time of student deposit to promote engagement, a sense of belonging and a feeling of efficacy, as students will immediately make progress toward their degrees.

We're going to look to move first-year orientation and FOCUS activities to earlier in the summer, including the opportunity for students to obtain both cultural and academic credit, again enabling them to make immediate progress toward their Stetson degrees.

As our faculty chair indicated, we're really working hard to think about the reimagining and allocation of faculty time and student time at Stetson. We're going to stimulate a community-wide laser focus on the student experience, student curricular campaigns, student retention and graduation. We're going to be asking the faculty and departments to continue streamlining and improving the curricular pathways — prioritizing learning skills and dispositions required for undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate success. Let's make sure that what we require of students within their majors and general education will foster and encourage student exploration rooted in pragmatism, experiential learning, skill development and problem-solving.

Let's also ensure that faculty and staff talent, across ranks and across roles, is distributed equitably and strategically to promote student relationship-rich education, retention, persistence and graduation. Let's work to calibrate faculty teaching loads with experiential learning to closely mentor students and advise them. Let's focus on faculty/student collaborations and research, curriculum review, action research, and other practices that we know to be high impact. We know that will not only be important for our students but will vastly increase the chances that we will retain these students — which, given the demographics that I shared with you, is absolutely essential for Stetson's health in moving forward.

Let me say that again: Retaining the students that come to us is absolutely essential to the future health of Stetson University. These students work hard, and we've got to make sure that we give them lots of good reasons to stay.

I hope all of you share my confidence and my optimism that Stetson University's future is indeed bright. It's my belief that if we continually ask ourselves this question when confronted with decisions about policy and practice, we will indeed secure a bright future for our students and for our beloved university: "What is in the best interest of our students; what is in the best interest of our university?"

It is a very simple, straightforward question but powerful. I wish you all the very best as we begin this academic year. I thank all of you for your patience, for all of your hard work and for all of your dedication in making Stetson the very best it can be. This is indeed a very, very special place — a relationship-rich university that transforms lives. I could not be more honored and privileged to be on this journey with you, as we all seek to improve the human condition.

Stetson is back, baby! Let's go Hatters!