Chancellor Dorothy Leland’s Remarks at Faculty Convocation
(as delivered, August 17, 2016)

Good afternoon, and welcome to the 2016-2017 academic year.

I know that many of you spent the summer working on research and writing projects, but I hope you also found time to relax and enjoy some non-work related activities.

UC Merced is 11 years old. Some of you may have children who are about that age, and if you do you know that from a biological standpoint, the eleven-year-old “tween” is all about change. And so too for this young campus. We are in the middle of an important growth and development stage that is sometimes awkward, often challenging, sometimes frustrating, and, on occasion, exhilarating.

Last year during the faculty convocation I talked about change and the fact that we are moving through a necessary transition from a start-up campus to the beginning stages of maturity as the youngest campus of the great University of California system. We know the challenges—and I will return to some of these in a moment. But I want to start today by celebrating how far we have come in the few short years of our existence.

If you are a part of UC Merced’s founding faculty, I also want to extend a special word of gratitude. When you arrived here, the construction of our first building was not even completed. And like that structure—the Kolligian Library – everything else required to transform a physical site into a place where discovery and learning occur still had to be built. And build you did—curricula for degree programs, new courses, research agendas, advising and academic support functions, governance structures, and so much more.

In those early years, the campus struggled to attract students, and even though members of our faculty—then and now—were as accomplished as the faculties of the UC’s more
well-known campuses, it took some time before students around the state began to recognize UC Merced as a special place of opportunity.

We opened our doors with 875 students, most from the “referral pool” of students denied admission at other UC campuses. Today, we serve approximately 7,000 students, and for the vast majority of these students UC Merced is now a campus of choice. And that’s something to celebrate.

But there is more.

We lead the University of California in the enrollment of first generation students, underrepresented students, and students from financially challenged backgrounds. And if you sort for these three variables—first generation, underrepresented, and financially challenged--we graduate our students at a higher rate than any other Carnegie Research/High institution and almost all Carnegie Research/Very High schools.

We serve the demographic future of California, and we have been doing it very, very well. What you do in the classroom and laboratory—the challenge, encouragement, mentoring, and advice that you provide—is transforming lives on a daily basis. And for that you should also be proud.

So we owe our founding faculty a debt of gratitude for setting us on a course marked by important achievements and “bragging points” that we can own without embarrassment. And for all the faculty who followed in those footsteps, and the new ones here today, I want to acknowledge that you also are truly pioneers in helping to build a world class research university—a campus that cares about its communities, nurtures student achievement, embraces interdisciplinarity as a way to create new avenues for discovery that can only emerge from a foundation of disciplinary strength, a campus that celebrates the diversity of the populations we serve, and that values open-minded inquiry, continual learning, and creativity and innovation in everything we do.
On the research front, the progress you have made is also amazing. Provost Peterson will talk more specifically about this momentarily. I want to say that every year since I have been here, non-UC Merced members of our Committee on Academic Personnel go out of their way tell me how impressed they are by your research accomplishments.

This research ranges from studies of gender and race in various historical periods to water conservation, health disparities, unmanned aerial systems, solar energy, and so much more.

Increasingly, you are garnering individual and program awards and recognitions for your work.

And, within ten short years, with our very first Carnegie classification, UC Merced earned a Research/High ranking—and we are by far the youngest institution to appear on this distinguished list. This recognition is also to your credit—your research productivity, your creation of doctoral programs attractive to students, and your success in graduating students from these programs.

Finally, I want to call out your commitment to our surrounding communities. Only three University of California Campuses have earned recognition from the Carnegie Foundation for Community Engagement, and we are one of them. Examples of this engagement include leadership for a regional effort focused on issues related to Valley Fever, our Engineering Service Learning program through which faculty-mentored student teams collaborate with nonprofit agencies to solve urgent public problems, and the Children’s Opera, which exposes thousands of local children each summer to the joys of opera and theater.

Just this past year, you brought home major grants from the NSF, NASA, and NIH aimed at strengthening the STEM pipeline for underrepresented groups.

I am beyond proud of these community related accomplishments. They honor and exemplify one of the major reasons this campus was placed here in the wonderfully
diverse but economically and educationally disadvantaged San Joaquin Valley. Already, and continually over time, your community outreach and engagement efforts are bringing positive benefits to the region we serve.

From our earliest days of this campus, we have had to be creative and inventive to build this remarkable young university in all of its dimensions—and our second phase of development is no exception. Those of you who have been here for a while already know about the Merced 2020 Project, our name for an innovative strategy for doubling the space currently available on campus in order to address our current space deficit and also accommodate growth to 10,000 students. We won final approval of the project last month from the Board of Regents, and less than a week ago achieved financial close.

What this means is that shortly we will begin a four-year construction project that will deliver, in three phases:

- Three new research buildings
- 4 new lecture halls
- More than 50 new classrooms
- Numerous new parking spaces
- 1,700 new student beds
- An expansion of the early childhood education center
- A competition level pool, tennis courts, basketball courts and a recreation field
- A conference center with a large ballroom and campus store
- A 600 seat dining facility that will be the new center of campus
- A new entrance to the campus and improvement to the Lake and Bellevue intersection

Getting here was not easy, and we had to make some compromises along the way and again at the end through what is known as a “Best and Final Offer” process. Basically, we had to do some value engineering to keep the project affordable—which is not that unusual.
But I am happy to tell you that at the end of this process, the space for the academic program and research labs was kept entirely intact and continues to represent the largest share—by far—of the entire development program. And that is as it should be because it is through your teaching, research and service that we deliver UC Merced’s incredibly important mission.

Over the next month or so, members of the project team will visit your schools to provide you with much more detailed information on the project, its management structure, its campus impacts, and its final outcomes. Meanwhile, I hope you will mark your calendars for the groundbreaking celebration on October 14 at 1 pm.

As with our initial campus building, the facilities delivered through the 2020 Project are not important in themselves but rather for the ways in which they will enable us to accomplish our research, teaching, and service missions. Since I arrived here six years ago—and even before that time—the campus has operated with an increasingly serious space deficit. We have experienced a shortage of classrooms, offices for faculty and graduate students, labs, housing, and spaces for functions such as cultural centers, conferences, dining, and student recreation. The 2020 Project will change that equation—and this too is a cause for celebration.

Looking forward, there is still work to be done on many fronts, including finding better ways to support your research and teaching under conditions of continuing fiscal constraint. For example, you have told me—directly and clearly—that operational inefficiencies create understandable frustrations, and I promised you that we would begin to address this during the Fall semester. This summer, two respected staff members, Anthony Sali and Simrin Takhar (TUCKER) began the work of identifying the most serious pain points, and after verifying their assessment with you, our plan is to bring on staff this semester to help ease these pain points and allow you to focus more of your attention on teaching and research.
You have also told me—directly and clearly—that it is time to seriously consider organizational and governance changes in our schools that will devolve specific responsibilities from the dean level to program chairs. And this semester, a taskforce that includes AP chairs and deans will take on this challenge and provide recommendations for broader faculty input and review.

Both of these change initiatives stand as examples of the need to continually focus on what matters the most with respect to achieving our mission. But in a period of rapid student enrollment growth that overlaps with growth in maturity as a research university, the magnitude of change can be daunting.

That’s why we undertook last spring, the campus-wide visioning and change alignment exercise. We needed to be able to prioritize change based on a shared vision and transparent guidelines—rooted in that vision-- for evaluating various change initiatives.

Despite some skepticism, a number of you elected to participate, and for that I am grateful. You said, for example, that it was important to continue to nurture a culture of inquiry and discovery. If this is part of our vision, then we need to ask: What changes will help us to do this better?

You said, to take another example, that it is important to work with our communities to enrich the Central Valley. If this is part of our shared vision, then we need to ask, are there changes in organizational structures or processes that can better facilitate this work?

You said, to provide a final example, that we should strive for excellence in research as measured by Carnegie Research Very High Designation, large scale grants, National Academy Designation, Ph.D. placement, etc. If this is part of our shared vision, then we need to consider what more we might be able to do together.

In the coming months, the results of the vision and change alignment exercise will be shared with you and other campus constituencies.
But I want to close by noting that one of the things that really stood out for me during this process was the remarkable extent to which our staff takes pride in your research accomplishments. You are their rock stars, and many of them have a genuine desire to better support and connect with your work. They understand the profound impact that you have on the lives of students, and the impact that these students will have in their professions and their communities.

I share their admiration and respect. Your stewardship of our mission is palpable, and I look forward to working together with you during the upcoming year as we continue to shape this special place of opportunity. Our challenge is to do this in a severely resourced constrained environment, with an eye on the vision we share, a commitment to creativity and innovation, and with resolve to listen to and learn from each other. If we can do this—and I think we can—we will experience a surge in momentum befitting a rising star within one of the greatest university systems in the world.

Thank you for listening and thank you so much for who you are and what you do.