



NORTHERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

DR. BROCK TESSMAN, PRESIDENT
Presidential Investiture Remarks
September 29, 2023

Thank you, Mike. And thank you to everyone who has spoken already...Gerri, Jes, Chris, Steve, Kristin – it means a lot to share this stage with you.

And thank you, Chad.

I've had lots of great experiences as a mentor since you since our time at UGA but in many ways it feels like I'll always chase the magic of those early days of the Georgia Grand Strategy Group, when you, me, Amanda, Chris, Ashley, Jenna, and Dana (who is also here – thanks Dana!) would chat for hours over coffee about the relative merits of Rome's "Defense in Depth" strategy or Philip II's flawed tendency toward micro-management. Those experiences helped inspire me on the path to this podium today and it is a privilege to have you here, and for you to have introduced me on this day.

Well, I am tempted to jump right into some additional thanks, but...I've been told time and time again not to bury the lead.

So, I won't. Let's talk about the 100-plus kids who just stood on this stage. Let's talk about the 124 current student leaders sitting in the front of this theatre (that's one for each year that this University has been in existence). Let's talk about the countless number of NMU alumni - our former students – who are here today and the 70,000+ NMU alumni around the world.

I want to be very clear when I say that this University has always been, and always will always be – defined our students...past, present, and future.

The first and third graders who stood before you will inherit a world that is more complex, and perhaps heavier, than we can imagine. But they can look to our current students to see in front of them the opportunity they have – no matter what their background – to lead the kind of change that they believe in and the kind of change that just might lighten the load for future generations. And our current students...they can't help but be inspired by our alumni, women and men who have preceded them and gone on to reshape the world in every field and every far-flung place.

Yes, Northern Michigan University employs many staff and faculty, and yes, administrators. But our heartbeat is our student body. And as one generation leaves the graduation stage and another generation rolls into their first day on campus, our job as an institution is not to simply hand the baton of change from one generation to the next, it is to be a partner in their race, inside the classroom and out, from the moment they first choose Northern until well after their graduation.

And now, some thanks.

All those present, NMU students, staff, faculty, leadership. To our students, and our faculty, I am thankful to be here *for you*. To our staff, our leadership team, especially our Executive Council and our fantastic Board of Trustees (mention Steve Young as chair), thank you for the privilege of working beside you.

Thank you to our community, regional, and state leaders; we share a common mission of service to the greater good, and it is a privilege to join you in the important work that awaits us on that mission over the coming years.

And thank you to those who couldn't be here. Lifelong friends like Laura Kavanaugh; my running brethren at the University of Colorado and Brown University.

Thank you to my former colleagues in Montana, at the University of Montana in Missoula and at the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education in Helena. Especially Montana Commissioner of Higher Education Clayton Christian, who taught me many things but above all the importance of staying calm and collected when things get chaotic, as they often do.

And thank you to my mentors:

My Grandpa John, who stoked in me my love for maps, both literal and maps of the imagination;

George McClellan, my high school social studies teacher who gave me one of the greatest compliments of my life when he wrote in my high school yearbook that I "had what it takes to be a history teacher."

Thank you to John Gregorek, the track coach who found a way to keep me healthy enough to run a fast race here and there;

to Steve Chan, my PhD advisor Steve Chan who agreed to take me on as a student if I promised to take my dissertation as seriously as I took my running;

to Han Park, who taught me new approaches to diplomacy through his work as one of the most outstanding peacemakers of our time;

to University of Georgia President Jere Morehead, who found a way every month or so to share his wisdom over lunch with a new assistant professor even as he was running one of the biggest flagship universities in America;

to the late Sheila Stearns, who taught me about grace through her philosophy of "four seasons of leadership."

and to Janice Fitzgerald, Jim McCormick, who have been so generous with their insights and who have done so much to shape this generation of college and university leaders.

Thanks to my very best friends. Stephen Lester – who is here today, no doubt causing trouble - and David Liebowitz who is not here in the theatre but is very much present in spirit. From Alaska to Edge Hill to vehicle acquisitions during Dave's Goth Phase, to Round Midnight and Rocky Mountain Acquisitions, we are in it together until the end.

To Mike and Christy Roberts, a big thank you, of course for bringing your lovely daughter – my wife Kristin – into the world and also for proving day in and day out that I struck gold during the in-law lottery.

Thank you to my sister Brooke, for showing me the light early, being the most gracious and positive person whom I have ever known, being full of Sisu without even knowing it, and for being there to set me right time and time again. Brooke, you are who you are, and that makes us all glad.

Thank you to my mother, *the* Dr. Deirdre Tessman, who showed me as a kid what it meant to work hard (and how to spell words like "erudite"), in the early days balancing her growing career with her role as a wonderful Mom raising a young family, and oh yeah, earning her MBA and her PhD along the way...and then later she showed me, and everyone, what hard work and talent can do as she shattered glass ceilings everywhere she went as one of the most influential female leaders in the biotech and pharmaceutical industries. Mom, I have learned so much from you. And it makes me proud, to make you proud.

And the biggest thank you is to my talented and wise wife Kristin, who has sacrificed so much for this moment, and who continues to show me what it means to *actually* multitask and whom I consider to be my very best thought partner. She is my biggest champion but also my biggest challenger, and I wouldn't have it any other way; we are on this adventure together and I couldn't feel any luckier.

Most important, I am thankful to Kristin because with her I have been blessed with our little girls Frances and Leona. They are our best teachers, our biggest inspiration, and our biggest reminder about what is most important in life. You know, I am not an overly emotional guy but I have to say, Frances and Leona can make me choke up from time to time....and it's because the way they draw a shape, or run in the grass, or crack a joke, or give a sly smile, reminds me of my dad, who influenced me so very much and who I wish I could thank in person, but who passed away 10 years ago.

Oh yeah, and I should let you know that Frances and Leona also make me choke up from time to time because I swear, if we could get them tested for it in some alternative medical universe their results would come back and show that they are 49.9% demon. Kristin, they're not in the room, right?

Okay, so what does one do with the rest of this moment, when we celebrate a new chapter in the history of Northern Michigan University?

I would do well in this moment to look back on the evolution of our university, which would be apt given that next year is the 125th anniversary of our founding in 1899;

to reflect on our proud origins as a Normal School, charged with preparing educators to teach young people across Upper Michigan, a legacy we continue today along with the training we provide to many of our other graduates in what I call the "hero professions – not only education but also law enforcement professionals, community leaders, social workers, entrepreneurs, and those in nursing and the allied health professions;

it would be appropriate to note President Edgar Harden's post-war emphasis on something that I also hold dear: our open access "Right to Try" mission; rooted in his belief that "...higher education should be accessible to all who have sufficient mental, physical, and moral competence to profit from an opportunity to attend college;"

and of course – OF COURSE – I could bring us back to 1975, or 1991, or 1993 and 1994, and think about the excellence of Wildcat Athletics and the glory of our student athletes, victorious on the national stage. And speaking of stages and venues, I could revisit the glory days of Hedgcock Fieldhouse...Oh I wish I could go back in time and scream my head off for those 1979 and 1980 basketball teams...or for Bob Seger or Eddie Money...

No celebration of NMU would be complete without heralding our alumni...and many in this room know the names of those women and men who have gone on to great notoriety and acclaim...

But even more important is the collective spirit, strength, and inspiration provided by every one of our 70,000+ alumni, who live everywhere from Center Street to Wall Street to Silicon Valley to the other side of the world. I just experienced my first homecoming, and amidst all the festivities, all the fun, all the honors, the most lasting impression was the realization that, so many of our students at NMU come to love this place while they are here...our support staff...of course their professors who inspire them to achieve wonderful things, both big and small, professional and personal. And that love brings so many of our alumni back to campus to reconnect with each other, this campus, this community, and the next generation of NMU graduates.

Yes, in this moment, on this stage, there is no end to what I could share about our proud history. And what about the present? Right now? If you haven't heard, Northern Michigan University is a university on the rise. And really, if you haven't heard, let me know because its Derek Hall's fault.

We have redesigned our entire administrative structure to support, and elevate, the people who study and work here. Our students, through new leadership pillars - one dedicated to degree completion and career development, another to providing an exceptional experience to all our students, whether they live in our residence halls or commute to campus from Gwinn, Skandia, Harvey or Ishpeming. And a third new pillar dedicated to supporting the development and wellbeing of not only our students, but the faculty and staff who help them realize their dreams.

We are one of the first universities in the entire country to sign on the Okanagan Charter, a global compact among institutions of higher education that commits us to promote wellbeing – mental health, physical health, healthy campus culture, environmental health - into everything we do, from our academics to our daily operations to our engagement with our local and global communities. NMU was the 17th campus in the country (and one of the first in Michigan) to commit to the Okanagan Charter, but we will **push** and **push** and be second to none when it comes to living up to that commitment.

Indeed, NMU is on the rise, in so many ways. Faculty excellence in and out of the classroom. Distinctive academic and workforce training programs. Positive enrollment growth. A growing partnership with a vibrant community in one of the most beautiful natural settings in the world. And there is even more to look forward to as we head into the next year, one in which we will publicly launch our next major fundraising campaign *and* formally celebrate our 125th anniversary as, in my opinion, the flagship university of Upper Michigan.

I suppose in my contemplations about how I might spend this important moment, I've come darn close to **actually** spending the entire moment.

But I will exercise my newly formalized presidential privilege and wind up, as I often do, by looking forward, at our opportunity horizon; what can define this University in its next chapter, and then well beyond the time I have here to steward the institution as it continues to traverse the long arc of history.

Let's talk about Artificial Intelligence.

I don't bring this subject up because I have some grand reveal about how this speech was written by Chat GPT. And, despite the fact that we have globally prominent faculty and staff like Tony Aumann and Scott Smith figuring out how to incorporate AI most effectively into our classrooms and operations, I don't want to talk about that either.

I want to talk about how Northern Michigan University, and everything that makes us who we are, will become even more important to our students, our employees and our communities as we skyrocket into a world that is characterized by artificial intelligence and the qualities it embodies.

Now, let me be clear. There is no way to downplay the power and potential of generative AI; I mean, if you open ChatGPT and ask it to write a new fight song for the Detroit Lions, it's spot on. Here is just one verse:

"From Stafford to Goff, we pass the torch,
In the Motor City, we'll always march.
With legends past, and legends to be,
Detroit Lions, forever we'll see..."

I mean, it's perfect – even the cynical "we'll see..." at the end.

But, to be serious, we know AI is not only an incredible and ever-growing repository of quick knowledge and analysis, most AI engines also rank in the top 1% of most tests designed to measure human creativity. But no matter what opportunity AI presents to us as humans, it is not human. In order for us to prosper, we need, as a society, to amplify our attention to our uniquely human qualities and use those qualities to proactively engage the opportunities of the modern AI world while also insuring our future against some of the challenges that will come along with this transformation.

Northern Michigan University – this institution and all of us as the people who define it – *are ready to lead in what is coming next*. Our DNA as a University is defined by some of the uniquely human qualities that artificial intelligence will have a very hard time colonizing.

We are a university that develops a sense of belonging, provides an opportunity to earn trust, and never underestimates the importance of respect, love, and emotional connection that comes along with human relationships. Our human connections are a territory where artificial intelligence cannot tread; a downward glance, a change of voice, or a scream of joy mean something more to us here, because we are here, being human, together. We can sense each other's wellbeing, and take care of each other, because we

know each other in mind, but also in heart, in data point observations like a missed class that shows up on a spreadsheet, but also because a student comes into an advising appointment and the human being across the desk notices something as subtle as like a lack of spark in the eye or spring in the step.

We are a university with a deep sense of context and appreciation for the unique aspects of our place – its history, its geography, its lore. You can walk along a wooded trail next to the Dead River and see the tobacco-colored water running over rock and understand – in a way artificial intelligence cannot – the intersection of our geology and botany and history, and you can gain an appreciation, as a HUMAN BEING, the subtle elements that makes our place what it is. That, in turn, can inform at the deepest level of sophistication, what the right decision may be in that given moment, personally, for the university, or for our world.

We are a university that understands, clearly, that our value as human beings will be increasingly defined not by our ability to provide the right answer, but by our ability to craft the right question. Our brains are no longer the most efficient way to collect, manage, or analyze data. AI already outpaces us on that front and the gap will only grow. But AI's efficiency is also its downfall. In spite of the notion of AI as “generative” it is actually derivative. Each ChatGPT essay that it writes, or Lions fight song that it crafts, is culled blindly from the raw material of the accessible web. As more and more content is “generated” by AI engines, more and more of what AI leans on will, in itself be a result of content that has been generated by AI. And the cycle repeats until the bulk of our content – and the bulk of the answers, analysis, and even creative content that AI provides will be derivative, from earlier AI output. In the end, we are left with a funnel of knowledge, efficient but decidedly lacking in diversity.

Northern Michigan University can do and will do what AI cannot – we can ask new questions and bold questions and we can keep the doors of new inquiry wide open. We can prize curiosity and elevate the outlier perspectives that are the keys to meaningful discovery. How? By embracing the diverse life experiences, perspectives and identities of each and every one of our students and employees. By looking back seven generations and forward seven generations to consider ideas that are so old, or so undiscovered, that they aren't found on our self-centered radar. We *must* maintain our open access model and push it to new heights, welcoming new talent and potential, new ideas, new questions from every corner of the UP and Michigan, from traditional and non-traditional populations, from diverse political orientations and economic backgrounds.

And once we bring students here, to this campus that will prize diversity in all its forms, we must inspire them and challenge them with an unwavering commitment to academic freedom. This may require us to be brave in tolerating and meaningfully engaging ideas – inside and outside the classroom - that challenge our preconceptions. This may require us to argue points that make us uncomfortable. But because the diversity of our people and the diversity of our ideas are the bedrock of our uniquely human ability to “ask the right questions” - we will – at all costs – defend those principles as red lines that cannot be crossed, no matter the strength or source of the pressure.

And how can I, as an adopted Yooper and as a former distance runner who has come to appreciate the importance of grit and determination in the face of adversity, not mention Northern's role in highlighting the uniquely human quality of *sisu*. Since I am a newcomer to the UP and I know my take on *sisu* will be subjected to some well-deserved scrutiny, let me just focus on one aspect of *sisu* that Northern embodies – that is the action mindset: “a consistent, courageous approach toward challenges that at first seem to exceed our capacities.”

Sisu is the story of so many of our students, our staff and faculty, and our community members. One of the most striking personalities I have encountered since my arrival here is the late Mary Biekkola Wright. Now, I won't address the full scope of what I know is her very complex story, but I will say that *she knew what it took* to work, strategize, persist her way to success, no matter the magnitude of the community project she had in mind. And I think about so many of our students. Perhaps they are well into their professional lives. They attended college once – maybe Northern in fact – and it didn't work out. Now they have a family. They are rooted in a community and in a field of work. And they decide that they are going to tackle the challenge of returning to NMU and completing their degree because of the new doors it will open for them. Or perhaps it is simply because they want to finish what they started. And they do it. Some do it alone. Some do it with family and friends by their side. Or with direct help. From our advisors. From their professors. From their peers. Many of our students don't know the clear path to their future or even

exactly how they are going to manage to complete their degree in the midst of many life responsibilities and all that life tends to throw in their way. But they are courageous. And they tackle, step by step, class by class, the challenge that they may have thought exceeded their capacities. Our students embody *sisu*, our employees embody *sisu*, our community embodies *sisu*, and it is something pure and human and untouchable by any artificial form of intelligence.

In his forward to Miriam Hilton's history of NMU, Our 8th president John Jamrich expresses it best:

“the thread that wove the tapestry that has become Northern Michigan University is people – people within and outside of the University, sacrificing, planning, working with one another – sharing in the joys and sorrows, the good times and the bad.”

Jamrich is right – our people make us who we are today. And as we move forward, it is our people...our students...our wonderful staff and faculty...the people of the communities that we serve and our uniquely human qualities that will define our opportunity horizon, and allow us to continue building this University, which is OF THE PEOPLE, BY THE PEOPLE, and remarkably well positioned FOR OUR FUTURE.

And now I am at the end of this remarkable moment, and oh what a wonderful moment it is for this human being to be a Wildcat.

Thank you.