



and I shall indeed come to those shortly, but first I must recognize that our work and accomplishments as a University during this past year have taken place within the context of some of the most challenging, frightening and unstable of environments in decades. The COVID-19 pandemic has reached into our University and communities and upended our work for nearly one year. All members of our MGA family have suffered disruption during the pandemic. Some 400 plus members of our University community have contracted the virus, and hundreds of others been required to quarantine. And tragically, a few members of our MGA family have lost loved ones to the ravages of COVID-19. Please join me in a moment of silence to remember those close to the MGA family who succumbed this past year, and to extend best wishes for those now battling the virus.

Thank you. Now despite the pain and disruption of this pandemic, I can report to you this afternoon that it is clear that our University is weathering the COVID-19 storm with resilience and determination. Nearly 8,000 students are currently studying at MGA, and our amazing faculty and staff have adapted their teaching and work - (no) 0.4J0 Tc 0 wh003 Tc h60079.IT



welcome a new president. I urge us to heed the words of President Biden in his Inaugural address: "Without unity, there is no peace, only bitterness and fury.... This is our historic moment of crisis and challenge, and unity is the path forward. Hear one another, see one another, show respect to one another."

Similarly, Governor Kemp noted two weeks ago in his State of the State address, the people of Georgia have risen admirably to these challenges of our times. Noting the health crisis caused by COVID-19 and the economic downturn in its wake, Governor Kemp reminded us that Georgians have built solid foundations literally in the soil of the State over the centuries, and our resilience will bear new harvests for the future. His focus on initiatives to strengthen rural Georgia spoke directly to our mission and opportunities as a University, raising our potential at MGA to partner in areas such as healthcare and education, which Governor Kemp has

Indeed, our work is of such great importance in helping our students and our society navigate the future

Today that Center is one of many symbols we have across our campuses of increasing strength, its outline and frame visible from I-475 – signaling for all to see that we are a University that has marched forward despite the headwinds of COVID-19. What are some of the other ways we have marched forward since I spoke to you last winter? Since last January we admitted the first class of Knights to experience life and learning at our new Lakeview Pointe residence hall. That home to our students has been enhanced, with support from Macon-Bibb government, by the addition of safer and more aesthetic roadways to our students' residences and the Macon campus perimeter. We secured two additional aircraft at the Macon Downtown airport, thanks to the Jones Family Foundation, and extraordinary results from the 2020 General Assembly in funding an expansion of our Nursing program in Dublin, as well as increased capital investment in Aviation on our Eastman campus. And today, here in Cochran, we have around us similarly renewed facilities in the Roberts and Dillard buildings, embodying our dedication to teaching and learning.

But all of this capital investment is only important if it drives learning and propels our onward journey to teach and equip our students with career-building degrees. On that front I am proud

of what our faculty and staff have done for our students. I am proud of the work we have done to

Our academic emergence as a state university now requires us to make the case for a similar level of funding as other state universities. We must always strive to be the most affordable state university in the state and region, but our goal must also be to seek to reduce the funding “gap” between MGA and other state universities in Georgia, precisely in order to maintain the extraordinary momentum we have demonstrated since consolidation nine years ago. Reducing that funding gap may take some time as well as effort, but as your president I assure you it is a goal I shall pursue for the benefits of our students and our community.

In this past year, countless accomplishments have occurred at the place we know and love as Middle Georgia State University. The true strength and promise of the University, however, lies in the people we serve – our students. It is they, and their careers and lives as alums, who tell the story of who we are. And when we hear that story, it is indeed an inspiring one. It is a story we can continue to shape, even with the headwinds of a pandemic and an economic downturn. I appreciate the confidence you have each shown daily in our University in your studies and your work, even as we faced dark and uncertain times this past year. As we returned this January to campus, we anticipated continued challenges as the pandemic increased within our communities and, yes, even on our campuses. But our experiences have made us stronger and ready to face this year’s harsh realities with confidence and resilience. As we anticipate the large-scale availability of vaccinations – and I urge you please to take the vaccine when you can – we must meantime continue every safety precaution to do our part to stop the spread of COVID

one another in person in the hallways, cafeterias and residence halls and in many other campus spaces. Our faculty and students will be able to set aside laptops and connect again at renewed levels in classrooms and labs. We must have the confidence to expect to do that again. We have work to do and a ways still to go to recover that reality, but we shall work to that end. We will come back together and thrive in the energy of shared campus experiences. Knowing that, I am pleased and honored to tell you that the State of the University in 2021 is one of heroism, determination, and hope. Let that reality illuminate our path in the months ahead. Thank you. Be well, and GO KNIGHTS!

Christopher Blake, Ph.D.

President, Middle Georgia State University

Tuesday 26<sup>th</sup> January, 2021