

**Fall Faculty Meeting
Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020**

**MIDDLE
TENNESSEE**

STATE UNIVERSITY

10 a.m., Tucker Theatre

Dr. Sidney A. McPhee, President

Good morning! Thank you, Provost Byrnes, for that introduction.

I want to welcome each of you to this virtual Fall Faculty Meeting — the first in the history of the university and, hopefully, the last.

As has been the custom for our campus for many years, I am honored to start our new academic year with the State of the University address, as we officially celebrate the beginning of another new academic year.

Today, we officially celebrate the beginning of the 2020-21 academic year, undoubtedly one that will go down in the university's history books as a year unlike any that's come before.

As we prepare for this new semester, we are all very much aware that this year is unlike any other in our university's 109-year history.

The year 2020 will certainly go down as one that was unprecedented, most challenging, life-changing, and

significantly disruptive, but as I remind my colleagues – it has also been one of remarkable opportunity, as we have worked collectively to address the many issues created by the coronavirus pandemic.

Now, before I take a few moments to reflect on this past academic year, allow me to begin by offering my sincerest appreciation to each and every one of our employees — faculty, staff, and administrators — for the incredible determination and dedication you have shown over the past few months as we fought through the challenges brought on by COVID-19.

Our ability to succeed in this environment is directly related to your individual efforts. So I sincerely thank you!

I believe that we are all well aware, for the past few months, our nation, and in fact our world, has been affected by the coronavirus and its seemingly unrelenting impact on our health and fiscal well-being.

Our campus, which just six months ago was filled with the energy and excitement of our students and the dynamic vitality

of a college community, suddenly went quiet and, dare I say it, lonely.

The coronavirus outbreak completely disrupted our education system, from classrooms to our residence halls.

In nearly four decades as a university administrator, I have never experienced anything like this pandemic and its devastation on our entire community.

Yet throughout these past few months, as we were forced to make major changes in our operations and campus life, I was constantly amazed by the incredible resilience and adaptability of our campus family.

From our faculty, who in just a couple of weeks this past March, transitioned approximately 5,000 on-campus, in-person courses to remote teaching and learning, to our students, who demonstrated remarkable determination and patience in adapting to a new learning style and quickly found ways to successfully complete the academic year, we succeeded because our community chose to succeed. We refused to allow this disruption to define us!

As we begin this new semester. I think it is also important that we are mindful of the challenges of those citizens around us and in the communities we serve.

As of August 7, we were reminded that we still have more than 16.3 million Americans out of work and, here in Tennessee, many counties are facing double-digit unemployment levels.

In June, 307,200 Tennesseans were unemployed.

We are very fortunate at this university to have our jobs so we can support our families.

And while our state had a stronger than expected revenue report for July, we are still experiencing the impact of the coronavirus in our state budgets, as millions of dollars in revenues were lost over the past few months.

We are analyzing how these factors will affect our campus in the coming months. I am cautiously optimistic, however, that the situation will be mitigated, to some degree, by the

incredible results we are seeing in our student recruitment and retention efforts for the upcoming academic year.

While many of our sister campuses across the state are looking at preliminary numbers being down, ours have held relatively constant, and in fact, we have seen a significant increase in the enrollment in our graduate programs and returning students.

Our vice provost and dean of graduate studies, **David Butler**, and his staff have revitalized our efforts in graduate recruitment, and we are poised to benefit from their efforts in these trying times.

The next two weeks will provide us a much clearer picture of our enrollment, at which time we will make any adjustments needed to assure the continued success of our university.

However, our total student enrollment as of today is showing an overall increase for fall 2020.

Now, please allow me to briefly highlight some of our accomplishments this past year.

In the midst of all the disruption and confusion caused by the coronavirus, it would be easy to forget that 2019-2020 was also a year of incredible progress and success for our university.

In fact, as I was putting together my comments for today and reflecting back on the year, I was amazed at the number of significant achievements and changes we have experienced since our meeting last year.

I am pleased to announce that perhaps the most gratifying recognition came earlier this week, as **the prestigious Princeton Review ranked MTSU — for the second year in a row — as one of the 300-plus best colleges and universities in America in its 2021 national ranking.**

Again, only two public institutions in Tennessee achieved this honor, and it's something we should all take great pride in.

Combined with the fact that a number of our individual academic programs are nationally ranked by educational peers and industry leaders, I think it's safe to say that our programs consistently meet and often exceed the needs and expectations of our many constituent groups.

It was also rewarding to see that every college and division on our campus experienced success over the past 12 months.

Some, like the establishment of several new degree programs or the awarding of a major research grant, may seem routine or even mundane, but in fact, they represent the continued belief, from our state and nation's higher education and scientific community, that we are continuing to grow and respond to the academic and research needs of our society.

I wish I had the luxury of time to list all of the great achievements earned by our faculty and staff.

I should note, however, that a few of our accomplishments are more transformational, offering exciting new opportunities for our students and faculty and assuring that we stay on the forefront of the discovery and innovation.

So, at the risk of leaving out some extraordinary achievements, I would like to mention just a couple of examples that I think demonstrate how creative and responsive we are as an institution.

Last February, just a couple of weeks before COVID-19 became the buzzword of 2020, the university announced the establishment of a new **Data Science Institute**.

Under the direction of **Dr. Charlie Apigian**, along with his faculty colleagues, and with the support of more than a dozen of the area's leading information and technology firms, the Data Science Institute connects education, research and service to provide solutions to business problems, increase productivity, and stimulate innovation.

Combined with a new degree program and graduate certificate, the institute firmly establishes MTSU as the state's leader in this emerging area. I might add that its student enrollment has already exceeded our projections.

In our **College of Education**, a new partnership with **SCORE**, a state education nonprofit organization, will seek to ensure new teachers are better prepared when beginning their careers.

MTSU and the **State Collaborative on Reforming Education** signed a three-year agreement to develop and implement strategies and practices focused on bringing innovative, research-based teaching methods to the university.

Our goal is to have MTSU's College of Education ranked as one of the best in the nation.

Why is this important?

In each of the last three years, MTSU has graduated more than 300 students with a degree in K-12 education, which is approximately 10% of new Tennessee teachers, and making us one of the state's top teacher preparation programs.

Our success in this endeavor is critical to the state's demand for a better K-12 education system.

As an institution that prides itself on student success, each year there are literally hundreds of examples of student achievements, and this year was no different.

This past spring, **Jared Frazier**, a chemistry and computer science major, was selected to receive the prestigious **Goldwater Scholar Award**, and **Brittany Johnson**, **Joan Shock**, and **Demin Zawity** have received **Fulbright Fellowships**.

And while we're talking about our incredible students, I would be remiss if I didn't mention their remarkable efforts in our **Day of Service** following last spring's tornadoes.

Hundreds of students, along with faculty and staff, spread out across Middle Tennessee, not to enjoy a day out of class but to help those families in need due to the devastating storms.

Everyone who helped that day was truly putting the values of our True Blue pledge into action!

Success wasn't limited to our academic programs and our outstanding students.

Our **Division of Student Affairs** has done an incredible job in attracting the best students to our campus.

The staff has done an exceptional job in preparing for the safe return of our students, from health services, food services, on-campus housing and many student support programs.

Others across campus have achieved their own level of success.

In our **Division of University Advancement**, private financial support continues to provide valuable resources for our campus.

Last year, our fundraising total was \$10.8 million. That is \$700,000 more compared to the previous year, despite losing nearly one-third of the year in fundraising activities due to the outbreak of the virus.

Our **True Blue Give** in February raised more than \$420,000 in three days with a sizeable portion directed to programs impacting students with significant need.

Our **Athletic Department** continues to demonstrate the importance of the “student” in “student-athlete.” The NCAA’s annual report on academic progress recognized that **100**

percent of our athletic teams earned a multiyear Academic Progress Rate of over 950 — an amazing distinction we have made for 11 consecutive years!

I also want to acknowledge the tremendous work done by those in the **Division of Marketing and Communications**, particularly over the past six months.

The entire staff has worked around the clock to post timely updates, publish guidelines, coordinate virtual town hall meetings, produce all the necessary signage and materials to assist in the safe reopening of our campus, and even produced virtual commencement ceremonies, just to list a few of their efforts.

And lastly, regarding commencement, I want to acknowledge the work of **Susan Fieldhouse, Cindy Johnson** and their staff in the **Records Office**, who packed and delivered **more than 3,000 True Blue Graduation Boxes** to help each of our spring and summer grads celebrate the completion of their degrees while at home.

As each box had to be individually matched to the correct student to ensure that each received the correct diploma, honor cord or stole, and other celebration items, this enormous undertaking was truly an act of love and True Blue spirit.

Now, we must turn our attention to a new academic year and, with the experience and insight gained from the past several months, begin to initiate plans for a successful return to campus.

As we look to the coming year, we are most certainly, in some respect, traveling through uncharted territory.

Yet this isn't our first rodeo; we have considerable experience from the recession of 2008-2010, when we were forced to make major operational changes and adapt to a new fiscal environment due to significant budget reductions.

That experience gave us a model to begin to work from, and we utilized a similar format to address the challenges caused by COVID-19, bringing key administrators, faculty leaders, and community partners together to develop a plan that would allow us to successfully resume our on-campus operations this fall.

With the intent of resuming on-campus operations this fall, this group, the **COVID-19 Task Force**, quickly and efficiently developed a blueprint for us to follow.

Led by our provost, **Mark Byrnes**, the group developed key practices and strategies that we feel provide the best opportunity to reopen the campus to our students and employees.

The committee's report and the companion "**Charting the Course**" **guide** for employees returning to work have established the policies and procedures we will need to follow in order to mitigate the spread of the virus.

Most importantly, and consistent with our ongoing commitment to the health and safety of our community, **our** efforts will follow the best public health practices and guidelines from the state and federal government, particularly the guidance that has been issued by the CDC and the state of Tennessee, especially for higher education.

You will find a link at the top of our homepage that will direct you to our most recent updates and information on COVID-19.

While all of us are anxious to get back to our more traditional routines, we will not make hasty decisions. We have developed and implemented a strategy and plan that allowed us to safely bring employees back to campus and provide a quality level of academic and resource services for our students returning next week.

As our campus reopens to faculty and students, you will find a number of efforts in place that will help us manage campus wellness.

While totally eliminating the risk from the virus is currently impossible, I feel the steps we have taken and will take will enable us to effectively manage our campus health and safety.

We will experience infections among our employees and students, and we will be prepared to respond.

However, **it is imperative that every member of the MTSU community adhere to our policies and practices to assure**

that we provide the safest possible environment for our faculty, staff, students, and guests while maintaining our recognized level of academic excellence.

My expectation is that everyone on campus will commit to and follow all guidelines established by the university, particularly the wearing of masks or face coverings, which is required for entry into any of our buildings.

While I won't belabor the issue, there are a few key points that I want to be sure we are all clear on.

- Managing campus density is critical to our success. We will be using reduced class size, hybrid course offerings, and expanded remote learning opportunities to reduce the number of people on campus at any point in time.
- We will be modifying our fall calendar to allow on-campus classes to end at Thanksgiving, with finals being conducted online.

- We have and will continue to modify or eliminate a number of our larger group activities and events to avoid large gatherings.
- In addition to changes in our academic operations, we will follow state and CDC guidelines for social distancing and daily individual health evaluation, as well as enhancing our health and safety protocols, with new cleaning and disinfecting standards and providing personal protective equipment for employees whose duties require it.
- **I REPEAT: To reduce the potential for person-to-person transmission, masks will be required in all buildings, with the exception of private offices**
- I have asked our vice presidents and deans to look for opportunities, where appropriate and practical, for employees to continue to work from home or use flex schedules to reduce staffing numbers in offices.
- Our students represent a very diverse population, ethnically, socially, and demographically. Many of them hold part-time or full-time jobs, are raising young families,

or caring for older parents. They will require flexible learning environments and creative delivery methods to balance life and learning.

I'm looking to each of you to show compassion while providing every student the best education possible.

- While our intent is to maintain an on-ground learning environment, we are prepared for all possible scenarios.

Working with our medical staff, we have established a number of trigger points that will guide us in determining if and when we will need to transition to remote online teaching and learning due to a surge in the virus.

- We have asked faculty to be prepared to transition their coursework to an entirely distance-learning mode in the event health conditions on campus dictate a change in operations.

To help make this a smooth transition, the **Division of Information Technology** conducted 26 instructional

professional development workshops on Zoom and other virtual software options with more than 1,600 attendees. More workshops are scheduled for the fall semester.

As an institution that has received national acclaim for its commitment to the success of each of our students, we will make every effort to assure that we fulfill that promise to our campus community.

This pandemic has challenged everyone in higher education, and it has required some unique adaptability and perseverance from all of us.

Our students chose MTSU because they believe in the quality of our programs and our commitment to each student.

More importantly, they believe in you, and I BELIEVE IN YOU.

That belief is something you must not take lightly. And we must remain dedicated to providing the best possible education, regardless of circumstances.

As we look to our future, our **Quest for Student Success 2020-2025** initiative remains our guiding compass, providing a focus on a deeper and broader academic and student life experience that extends learning beyond graduation.

On matters related to the university budget, as I mentioned at the beginning of my remarks, the coronavirus pandemic has had a negative impact on our state's finances and, ultimately, our own budget.

As the financial challenges caused by the pandemic became clearer, all new funding requested for higher education, including funding for salary increases, was removed from the state's budget as a result of budget reductions.

However, with the advocacy of Tennessee Higher Education Commission Executive Director **Mike Krause** and the support of Gov. **Bill Lee**, Finance Commissioner **Butch Eley**, and the General Assembly, higher education was held harmless from cuts in existing base appropriations, while other state departments were asked to reduce departmental budgets by 12%.

At the June quarterly meeting, our university's **Board of Trustees** approved the university's recommendation of no increase in tuition or fees for the 2020-21 academic year.

With no new funding coming into the university this year and some minor reductions due to outcomes performance, budget reallocations will be needed to:

- fund increased scholarship levels,
- pay for increases in software maintenance agreements,
- support faculty promotions,
- fund new academic programs,
- and pay for other fixed costs.

To cover these fixed costs of the university, an adjustment of approximately 3.4% will be required in departmental budgets.

The financial impact to state revenues during this pandemic are expected to be felt over the next 12 to 18 months; therefore, we should anticipate possible reversions of appropriations in the current fiscal year.

I will be sending out instructions shortly outlining universitywide

budget restrictions and guidelines to help weather these unknown reductions.

Even in times of distress, it is important that we continue to prepare for the future, assuring that we have the resources and facilities needed to meet the next generation of MTSU students.

We are fortunate that our growth and success has enabled us to continue to expand our footprint.

Among our most recent and pending additions:

- Two days ago, we celebrated the completion of our new **Academic Classroom Building** for our **College of Behavioral and Health Sciences** with a ribbon-cutting ceremony.
- Also in the works, the new **School of Concrete and Construction Management** is currently in design development and is scheduled for an estimated fall 2022 completion date.

- And our new **Parking Services Facility**, which will house vehicle registration, bus maintenance, and personnel offices, will be complete in January 2021.

As noted earlier, this has been a remarkable year, one we can truly take pride in.

In closing, it goes without saying that the impacts from the virus are not over.

As I noted earlier, we must learn how to live with the virus by effectively employing measures to mitigate its impact on our campus and in our lives.

Over the coming weeks and months, we will continue to provide you with regular updates and notices of important events or activities.

There will be days when extra patience and empathy will be required and there will be decisions made that are not easy, but I assure you that we will make every effort to provide you and our students with an environment that is supportive of their success.

It has been said that a crisis can be, and I might add should be, a great catalyst for positive change.

And sometimes the best innovations are created in those times when we can't control every variable.

In a year that could have easily turned out much differently, we have prevailed.

We have seen a rise in our collaborations and partnerships with diverse stakeholders, including governments, industry, and technology providers.

Instead of being fearful of the future, we decided to be optimistic and creative.

We ventured to think of ways that we could not only survive but thrive.

We stepped up and asked, "How can we serve?"

Just as we've offered services to help our community in the middle of a pandemic, we must also be engaged in the social justice and equality that surrounds us, both on campus and in our community.

We must pledge to renew and reinforce our commitment to better understand and respect one another.

I recently hosted a Zoom listening session with almost 100 faculty, staff, students, and other stakeholders to identify social justice and equality issues on our campus and to discuss effective ways to address them.

As the semester unfolds, I will share with our community more details on this important initiative and the steps we can take to affect true change in our society.

In the meantime, it is vital that we each remember our True Blue values in all that we say and do.

I know these have been difficult, trying times for all of us.

And I want you to know how much I appreciate your service, your ingenuity, your dedication, and your inspiration.

Most importantly, I highly value you for what you have and will continue to do for our university.

As we move forward with a sense of passion and compassion, we do so with the belief that we are building a better future not just for ourselves, but for everyone.

It is my honor to serve with you as the 10th president of this great university.