

President Janine Davidson Investiture Address

Sept. 7, 2018, 3 p.m.

Welcome and Intro

Thank you, Steve Jordan and Ruthie. You have put your hearts and souls into building Metro State College into MSU Denver, the premier urban University that it is today. I am grateful for your leadership, your friendship and your continued passion for this institution.

Thank you so much to everyone here today! Since I arrived, I've been so inspired and amazed by how the metro Denver community comes together and supports one another, how you have welcomed me, along with my husband, Dave, and how much our community cares about Metropolitan State University of Denver.

I want to especially thank Chancellor Chopp, Mayor Hancock, Gen. McDew, and of course, Trustees Lucero and Pogge for your warm welcome and for being an integral part of this special day.

I also want to thank the rest of the Board of Trustees, Foundation Board and Community Cabinet members here today, and the search committee that hired me, including Rob Cohen, past trustee and search committee chair, and his wife, Molly, whose inspirational leadership

and support of MSU Denver touches so many Roadrunner lives. In addition, I want to thank other former leaders such as Sheila Kaplan, Cheryl Norton and Yolanda Ortega, as well as the amazing and dedicated faculty, staff and leadership team of today. You have handed me the torch, and I will carry it with great pride and dedication.

I'd like to also acknowledge and welcome a number of distinguished guests here today, such as Community College of Denver President Everette Freeman and Sen. Angela Williams.

Welcome also to those of you who have traveled from out of town to be here. In fact, I might not have even been here today myself if not for the nagging encouragement of two of my former Pentagon advisors who made the trip, retired Navy Capts. David McFarland and Todd Seniff, who knew this was my calling and insisted I throw my hat in the ring for this job, when I was sure that a university search committee would not seriously consider someone with my "nontraditional" background. As usual, you guys were right; this was great advice.

Finally, welcome to my dad, Jim Davidson, and wife, Sarajane Wallace, my brother Jim and my niece Sofie; and of course, our "first bloke," my husband, David Kilcullen. Dave, your calm, sage support and, especially, your sense of humor keeps my feet on the ground every day.

Great universities don't just happen; they are built by a community that supports them, stands by them and inspires them to be even better. Today is a day to reflect on what and who sustains and supports us, the essence of where we came from and who we are. It is the diverse and storied culture and heritage of MSU Denver, the Auraria Campus and the city of Denver that inspires me to be even better.

Thank you to Yolanda Ortega, Jesse Ogas, Lorenzo Trujillo and Camilla Ruiz for your welcome/blessing song today. It is so important for us to remember where we came from and to honor those who made sacrifices to create this urban campus.

Before MSU Denver was here, there was the Hispanic community who established their sense of place around St. Cajetan's Church, and Eastern European immigrants who established their community around St. Elizabeth's Church ... and before that, the Apache, Ute, Cheyenne, Comanche and Arapahoe tribes who lived on and around the banks of Cherry Creek and who were displaced.

Still, these communities are part of who we are today. Not only are their descendants still here, serving as community leaders, business owners, members of clubs and churches; but their culture, values and spirit are infused into the greater identity of our community. This blended spirit is what makes MSU Denver – like all of Colorado – what and who we are today.

Let me be clear: I am not trying to forget the part of our history that was unkind or unpleasant. We must acknowledge the past so we can learn from it.

So, while we cannot change the fact that we all work and study on ground that was taken from these Coloradans, we can make sure to honor those who came before us, honor commitments made in the past and attempt to embody all of this place's diverse history in who we are today. As we approach new challenges, we can apply the hard-learned lessons of past mistakes and omissions. So, at MSU Denver, as we work with city leaders and the greater Colorado community to address issues like housing and gentrification, or infrastructure, hunger, homelessness and the gap in higher-education attainment, we pledge to do so in more collaborative, inclusive and enlightened ways.

That is what I mean when I say that MSU Denver is *in* the city and *of* the city. We carry the past with us, but we are continually growing, learning and adapting every day to life in a changing and expanding urban core.

Today's Inauguration ceremony signifies both the start of a new chapter for MSU Denver and the continuation of the half-century love affair between this institution, the state of Colorado

and the sense of place we've created. In 1962, the idea for a new, different type of college was born here.

A legislative task force solicited the opinion of area businesses about their expected workforce needs in the coming decade. The shocking finding was that area colleges were producing less than half of the skilled workers needed. Chaired by then-state Sen. Roy Romer, the task force identified the need for a "street-smart kind of school," one where students would "rise or fall by their own wits."

This led to the task force recommending the opening of a four-year college that would admit anyone with a high school diploma or GED.

People whose personal or financial status limited their ability to leave Denver for flagship or land-grant public universities or those who, for whatever reason, needed a second chance to shoot for the American dream – all would have a place at Metro State. We still operate under this principle with our enrollment policy, ensuring that any student with the drive to excel has the access to do so. In short, we define ourselves by who we include, not who we exclude.

Wendell Berry, a well-known bioregionalist, said, "If you don't know where you are, you don't know who you are." If you know your location in all senses, you'll understand its sense of

place. At MSU Denver, we have been providing a sense of place, belonging and community to our students – who now count more than 90,000 as alumni – for nearly 55 years. They seek and find a community that will support them along the way as they transform their lives and the lives of those around them.

Today, we have more than 20,000 students, still benefiting from that sense of place, created in large part by the dedicated faculty and staff who do excellent work in ensuring our students' success – faculty and staff who have been part of our students' journey, serving as mentors, advisors and supporters. And who have helped develop and enhance student-support programs such as our Center for Equity and Student Achievement; our tri-institutional LGBTQ Student Resource Center, which is celebrating 25 years of service this fall; and our Veteran and Military Student Services office.

This is why I came here! The moment I set foot on this campus, I felt a connection to the role and mission of MSU Denver. Walking around the day before my interview, I could tell there was something happening here. This was not the little Metro campus I remember from when I lived in Colorado in the '80s and again in the '90s. There was a buzz, a pride, an edginess that was evident in every conversation.

I feel this buzz today and every day at this University. And though I stand on this stage now for this ceremony, I know that today is really not *my* day. It is our collective opportunity to celebrate MSU Denver's legacy, its amazing students and alumni, and to imagine the future of what we can and will become.

Today is about students – students like Justin Darnall, a Marine Corps veteran with two combat tours in Afghanistan and Iraq and one noncombat tour in Djibouti, Africa. The transition from military to civilian life was not easy for Justin. Before landing at MSU Denver, he studied at two other colleges but found them expensive and not veteran-friendly.

At MSU Denver, Justin found the Office of Veterans Education Benefits and groups that helped him master his anxiety and reimagine his future.

Justin, who now has a 4.0 GPA and was named the American Council on Education student of the year in 2017, found the perfect place to give back. He worked in the Veterans Education Benefits office, where he was able to help fellow veterans. And this spring, he was elected by his Roadrunner peers to serve as their Student Government president.

Justin found his sense of place here and is embarking on an exciting new chapter. He embodies what we call the "MSU Denver difference." Roadrunners work hard; they rarely let

obstacles get in the way – in Justin’s case, never – and their grit and tenacity allow them to soar and to have a positive impact on others.

Most of our students don’t follow some sort of fabled four-year, full-time student path.

Roadrunners come from the real world – from myriad backgrounds and experiences; and many of them, like Justin, require a more nimble and flexible learning environment to navigate the simultaneous demands of school and real life.

And providing this is what we do every day. Enhancing our ability to do this *at scale* for as many Roadrunners as possible is my primary objective as MSU Denver’s president.

I’m focused on this because it works. We see the power of this model with Meranda Vieyra, who was a working adult student during her time at MSU Denver and credits the University for its pliability and support in her success. It took her 12 years to graduate as she balanced demands of her “real life” with her studies.

This 2010 graduate in Chicano studies and criminal justice says she uses the skills she learned in her degrees every day to launch and operate her company, Denver Legal Marketing, the only Latina-owned legal-marketing company in Colorado.

We also see this in Theodore DeWeese, a first-generation student who came to college with no confidence, no idea what he wanted to do and a course load that included remedial math. He graduated magna cum laude in 1986 with a degree in chemistry, a minor in biology and a path to medical school. While at MSU Denver, he worked as an auto-parts clerk and mechanic. It took him six years to graduate as he juggled work and school. He went from fixing car radiators to a career in finding new radiation treatments for cancer patients. Today, Dr. Theodore DeWeese is the vice president of interdisciplinary patient care for Johns Hopkins Medicine.

And we saw this in Phil Danielson, who graduated a year early from Abraham Lincoln High School in Denver but, being the first in his family to consider college, had no plan for where to attend. In what he describes as “serendipity,” he got a letter from MSU Denver asking him to visit the Biology Department. He was thrilled to learn that MSU Denver saw potential in him. Having graduated from high school early, he was set on doing the same thing in college. When he met his advisor and explained the goal, she worked with him to create a plan to take an overloaded schedule each semester.

Despite working two part-time jobs as a doughnut baker and hospital orderly, Phil graduated in 1983 after only two years. Today, Dr. Phil Danielson is a DNA expert who serves as a

professor of molecular biology at the University of Denver and specializes in crime-related forensics.

Here's the question I often ask myself, and today I ask you: Without MSU Denver, what would have happened to Meranda, Theodore and Phil?

Let's face it, the reality of our K-12 education structure in the United States gives your ZIP code an outsized impact on your future. Not everyone comes from a high school focused on college entry or career exploration, with parents who can afford swanky ACT or SAT prep classes. The image many people have of college in today's America is the exception, not the rule. Most of today's college students – the majority of our future employees, middle managers, small-business owners, neighbors and community leaders – have to cram college into their real-world, zigzaggy lives. It may take them six or even 10 years to get there, instead of four, and sometimes debt; and this reality often calls into question whether the gain is worth the pain.

In 2017, five economists examined higher education's role in promoting upward mobility. They considered 30 million students between 1999 and 2014 and compared their parents' incomes to their own post-college earnings, by school. They found that our country's most elite universities, where students have a decent chance of moving up that ladder, are simply closed to most Americans: They just help well-off students stay well-off.

Meanwhile, there is another group of universities whose very mission is to elevate that critical part of America's middle class. In Colorado, that four-year institution is, by statute and by passion and culture, MSU Denver. MSU Denver is a vehicle of social mobility through the opportunities we offer all students, whatever their economic status or background, when they graduate and are on their way to the middle class or upper middle class.

MSU Denver students are diverse, reflecting the diversity of Denver's growing population. Ninety-five percent of our students are Coloradans, and one-third are Pell-eligible. In most cases, they are working their way through school. Nearly 87 percent of our students work full- or part-time while taking classes.

In last week's New York Times, Rainesford Stauffer, an exasperated full-time graduate student who works over 40 hours per week, wrote an opinion piece, "College vs. Paycheck," in which she expressed the common frustration at the rigidity of higher ed and those who advised her to just take out more loans to study more and work less. Doing only school or only work is a false choice, she said: "Which should I quit, the thing that would advance my personhood and career prospects or the thing that enabled me to pay for it?"

Instead of trying to bend would-be students to a system biased toward those who can afford a full-time, no-work experience, why don't universities seek ways to make higher education reachable for the vast number of students who must work while going to school?

I couldn't agree more! This is what higher education should be about. I believe that we, as leaders in higher ed, should wake up every day thinking about how we can adapt our structures, processes, curricula, even our mindsets, to better serve our students. And to do so within the context and around the constraints of *their* complex lives. Not the other way around.

And here is perhaps the even more important message: Our students don't just work to pay their bills and survive. If we do this right, they will be able to use that real-world experience as an asset on their journey from classroom to career. By focusing our efforts on the needs of these students, who comprise Colorado's future workforce, business and community leaders, MSU Denver plays a crucial role in Colorado's future.

That's why we are busy creating new opportunities to connect students to employers, starting from the day they walk through our doors – through apprenticeships, where students are paid to gain career-relevant experience with an employer – while simultaneously studying and filling critical workforce needs of local industry.

Our goal is to promote mobility and to do so at scale, through innovative student-centered practices.

In 2017, a Gallup/Strada survey asked students around the country a simple question: “Why are you going to college?” Eighty-five percent of students said, “to get a better job.”

This may seem really, really obvious to a lot of you in this room. But you know what? This is not where higher ed has traditionally focused its attention. Career services in the majority of universities are still considered an administrative backwater. Why is that? Well, according to Gallup, when asked a similar question in the 1960s, the majority of students did not say getting a job was their top priority. They said they were in college to “develop a meaningful understanding of life.” With a few exceptions, that is what higher ed has traditionally structured itself to do for its students.

Now, while I will make the case that this must change – and I will tell you exactly how we at MSU Denver are doing it – let me be clear: I do not think “developing a meaningful understanding of life” is unimportant or some sort of fluffy, indulgent waste of your time. In fact, I believe these two things are intimately interconnected. Thinking critically about

meaning and purpose is a very important element of finding out who you are and what you want to do with your time on this earth.

In fact, I would say it is a mandatory prerequisite to not just finding that first job but for crafting a rewarding journey and for thriving in one's lifelong professional pursuits. And, not surprisingly, it is through these intellectual pursuits we develop the skills employers are clamoring for.

Over and over again, I hear from business leaders who say that higher ed needs to stop graduating "robots" with technical skills but who lack qualities such as:

- cognitive flexibility and critical thinking
- cross-disciplinary and global perspectives
- innovation
- creativity
- leadership
- ethics
- and communication skills.

So while I am laser-focused on massively scaling our career-preparation programs in partnership with employers, I am adamant that we must not throw out those elements of a liberal-arts education that prepare our future leaders and fuel our civil society. It is through

the arts and humanities, as major, minor or general course requirements, that we stretch our minds and learn to think nonlinearly, or “elastically” – where we learn to question assumptions and flex our creativity.

So, like vegetables or protein in the lasagna, we will ensure these remain a part of MSU Denver’s core curriculum.

At the same time, we *will* continue to enhance partnerships with industry and employers in every sector, because yes, at the end of the day, placing graduates onto rewarding career paths is job No. 1 for me.

Before I arrived, I heard about the great success of my predecessor, Steve Jordan, when he spearheaded outreach to the aerospace and advanced-manufacturing industries, enlisting their help in designing a new, more work-relevant curriculum, complete with interdisciplinary course work and, critically, experiential learning opportunities with leading companies like Lockheed Martin, Hartwig or York Space Systems. They were even involved in the design of the building itself, to ensure it was a work-relevant learning environment.

Now we are taking Steve’s pioneering idea and applying it across the University and in partnership with any industry that wants to play.

We have hired Dr. Will Simpkins as our new vice president of Student Affairs with the primary goal of building out our new Classroom to Career Hub.

The C2 Hub will focus on experiential learning, including paid internships, apprenticeships and co-ops, tailored to the overlapping needs of our students and employers. We'll work with industry leaders to ensure that our programs are relevant to the world our graduates will face.

These external partnerships will be coupled with greater internal investment in student services, using technology, outreach and data analytics as well as hiring more peer and full-time professional advisors to enhance retention and graduation rates across the student body.

As we move forward with this career-focused programming, we will need to find new, more relevant ways to measure our success.

You've seen the traditional scorecards for higher ed in places like U.S. News and World Report or the myriad online data sources, which routinely put our kind of school at the bottom of their rankings. That's because these studies leverage deeply flawed Department of Education data that focus on things like a school's four- or six-year graduation rate, or their acceptance for first-time full-time freshmen, which is basically a measure of how exclusive they are to

begin with. But the most unfortunate thing about these metrics is that they literally leave off the vast majority of real-life college students.

Here is what I mean: The school graduation rates we all see in the reports do not count students who start at a community college, then transfer to earn a bachelor's degree (that's 56 percent of MSU Denver students); nor do they count those who start at one four-year school and finish at another. They ignore part-time students, who work hard to balance education with jobs and family and may take well more than six years to get over that finish line. Students who take a pause to work and earn some money, then return to finish their education are also not counted. All these students, who would include Justin, Meranda and Theodore, register as dropouts or "fails" in these reports. But, as the stories you've heard here today make clear, they are not. They are the embodiment of our American dream.

In fact, these so-called "fails" comprise the majority of our country's talent pool – talent that we cannot waste if our country is to remain competitive and an innovation leader.

So I think the metric that matters most for our mission and for our students, and for the real world, is about job placement and economic mobility, not about who gets rejected admissions to begin with or who takes a few more years to graduate.

We should instead be measured on how the hard work of our graduates, and the support of our outstanding faculty and staff, pays off. In 2015, Colorado's Department of Higher

Education reported in their College Measures student data that MSU Denver graduates had the third-highest median starting salary within their first year of graduation.

Take Scott Margolis, who took 21 years to graduate because he worked the whole time in the airline industry. This Computer Management Systems graduate now leads cybersecurity for a Big Four accounting firm – Ernst and Young. Not only was his life transformed, but he's transforming the lives of others.

We should instead be measured for our commitment to diversity. Great universities across the nation continue to strive to diversify their campuses, and MSU Denver is leading here, too. Eight thousand eight hundred sixty-two, or 44 percent, of our students are of color. And it's being noticed: We are a three-time winner of the Diversity Champion Initiative.

These are the metrics that matter. These are outcomes that play a big role in us helping the state continue to be prosperous, competitive, and to grow.

It is important to point out: We have not accomplished these things on our own. Great universities are built by a community that supports them, stands by them and inspires them to

be even better. Communities must engage and invest in this kind of institution, the kind that does what American universities were meant to do – support the American dream.

Here's how you can get involved in our mission:

Partner – We need the continued support of business and community leaders. To employers, I say, “I’ve heard you loud and clear.” You need talent. That, we have. We need you to partner with us to strengthen these pathways for our students and for you.

Donate – We need your philanthropic dollars. Public higher education is what made this country strong, and we need to continue to support that with funding from a hybrid of public and private funding sources.

Share our story – Tell everyone you know about the Roadrunner Difference; and about Justin, Meranda, Theodore and the 90,000 other graduates and 20,000 students fueling our economy and enriching our community.

MSU Denver is where we can hold the line on the sliding middle class and we can activate the American dream. Thanks to so many of you in the room, we have become the model urban

university for opportunity, diversity, excellence and transformation. Together we can build on what we've done and make it even greater!

Here's how we're going to make that happen:

- We will continue to redefine success, helping to change today's narrative about higher education.
- We will continue to invite industry leaders to help us develop and expand our career pathways.
- We will create an even greater sense of place and work to address growth and infrastructure challenges.
- We will continue to be a leader in diversity and inclusion, providing educational opportunity to all students.
- We will build on the shared strength of our 90,000 alumni, powering Colorado's vibrant culture and economy.
- We will continue to graduate tenacious and purposeful leaders who will help address the workforce needs of today and in the future.
- We will be known nationally as the model urban university!

Thank you for trusting me to take MSU Denver on the next step in our journey. I am honored and humbled by your confidence. I could not possibly imagine a better or more fulfilling place to be, a more important job to do, a greater state and city to do it for, or a more exciting and passionate community of people to do it with.

At MSU Denver, we like to say that Roadrunners can run their own road. Likewise, we are together running a new road in higher ed for Colorado and beyond. I'm proud to lead the way. So come along, come run with me.

Thank you!