INVESTITURE SPEECH – PRESIDENT RICH YAO
September 23, 2022

[Reflections on the Ceremony Thus Far]

I'm overwhelmed. Thank you, everyone. To the speakers from the CSU and from Channel Islands – Interim Chancellor Koester; Trustee Fong; President Beck; Provost Avila; Chairs Miller, Block-Weiss, and Lisagor; President Tolteca and previous student government leaders – your words are so very moving and meaningful to me. Most importantly, they are a reminder that throughout my presidency, I must continuously re-earn them and the gift of your confidence.

To those who share their cultures, passions, and artistic talents here today – Chumash elders; the CI Dance Studies students, alumni, and the Hip Hop Mindset Crew; the CI University Chorus; Ms. Moreno; and the People's Trio – you have made this more than a ceremony for me. You have brought life, meaning and beauty to us all. And you have connected us here - in this space - with each other and with you. You remind me of how exponentially important it is to be connected, to *feel* connected, and to know that all of us belong here as valued members of this community.

To all of you who have come here today to participate in this investiture – to my family; our distinguished guests; elected officials and other members of surrounding communities that Channel Islands exists to serve; and of course, our CSUCI students, staff, and faculty: thank you.

I am also pleased to recognize this unique moment in our University's 20th anniversary year – with all of Channel Islands' previous presidents gathered alongside me here today. Thank you for your support, Presidents Emeriti J. Handel Evans and Richard R. Rush, and President Erika Beck. Your signature works will always be a part of the continuing story of CSU Channel Islands. I am honored to join you in forging the path of leadership for this campus that I care so deeply about.

[Reflections on the Thread That Connects]

From employees who began working at CI on day one - two decades ago - to those who like me, are more recent arrivals, we are united by a common thread. We have all chosen to invest our time, knowledge, skills, and energies *here*, to be of service from within *this* university – a university that offers each one of us the challenge every day to "*place students at the center of the educational experience*." How much easier would it be to think, first, in terms of

our own dreams and needs? To place responsibility for academic success on students' shoulders alone?

I'm not saying that the dreams and needs of CI's faculty and staff are unimportant, or that students are not responsible for their success. But what I do suggest… is that the thread that connects each one of us, doing our work in the important spaces we occupy on campus, is a common goal – and that is a commitment to the mission of this university. That mission – of placing students at the ***center*** of the educational experience – essentially asks those who work here to ***serve*** before being served. To recognize that the well-being of Channel Islands, and by extension, to the region and beyond, is directly and unquestionably related to the well-being and accomplishments of our students.

We strive to place students at the center because that is what true education requires. It is the value of and the potential within each and every student - that we want to define as the center of our work; and it is the richness of perspectives, beliefs, languages, cultures, ways of knowing, ways of being, forms of expression, and more, that our diverse and talented students contribute to their own educational experiences and to that of others – including my own.

[Reflections on Challenges of Leadership in the Current Context]

We strive to place students at the center of the educational experience so that we can understand and measure not only student success, but our collective success as the California State University serving the people of Ventura and Santa Barbara counties. There are critical questions that we must ask and courageously examine in order to celebrate and build upon our strengths and to make our needs for improvement *understandable*, *visible*, and *actionable*. For me, these essential questions include the following:

- Are enrollment, retention and graduation rates improving?
- Are we closing equity gaps?
- Are all members of our campus community consistently challenged, supported, and valued?
- Are graduates being employed in their field of study, earning incomes that allow them and their families to remain in the region and to thrive?
- Have we prepared our students to contribute meaningfully to the public good – helping to lead the work of advancing racial and social justice, working to heal the wounds that divide us and threaten stability at every level in American society, including those within families?
- Are we serving our region? Is our impact not only measurable, but palpable – through the qualities, knowledge, and skills that our graduates bring to their families,

communities, and places of work; through our contributions to sustainability, a healthier environment, and a livable planet; through acting upon the knowledge that *all* of our futures depend on how well we collectively serve the youngest of our children?

These are among the questions that give meaning to my work in higher education and to my leadership as Channel Islands' fourth president.

While questions like these help to shape the meaning of my presidency, the data we use to answer them provide its direction. Clearly, the stakes are high as to how careful we are in asking the right questions; how skillful we are in gathering and analyzing the right data; how thoughtful we are in interpreting the findings; how wise and fearless we are in making good use of those findings; and how committed we are to continuing that cycle of inquiry that Paulo Freire referred to in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as *"praxis"*— using data to inform our actions, and then reflecting upon our actions to inform new questions and the need for additional data.

While I will always ground my decisions in the best data available, I ground them also in what Menninger, Mayman, and Pruyser – writing nearly 60 years ago – called "realistic hope." In citing them, Thomas Sergiovanni argued that "educators can be both hopeful and realistic as long as the possibilities for change remain open" (2004, para. 4).

At CI, possibilities for change are tangible, though I acknowledge that it is not easy to lead towards and through - the changes that are needed at this precise moment in history. In addition to navigating the dynamics and complexities of everyday challenges in our lives and places of work, each one of us carries with us in varying degrees the emotional and psychological toll of all that is happening on the national and international stage – including the pandemic, the rise in hate crimes and normalization of hate speech, the intensifying effects of climate change, and, through extreme political violence and dysfunction, looming threats to long-assumed foundations of American democracy.

In this context, the importance of what post-secondary and graduate education offers to students, their families and communities, and to society at large has *never been clearer*. Yes, in our time, existential threats abound. But what also abounds, to a greater degree than for any prior generation in American history, is access to higher education in systems that are learning to prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion over supremacy, privilege, and exclusion. Now is not the time to shrink away from challenges at all levels of leadership. Now is exactly the time to lean into them – to name them, see them, and deeply understand them in order to develop the essential knowledge, skills, capacity, and *will* to overcome them.

[Reflections on Realistic Hope and Openness to the Possibilities of Change]

There is good reason to cultivate and nurture realistic hope, defined as "the attempt to understand the concrete conditions of reality, to see one's own role in it realistically, and to engage in such efforts of thoughtful action as might be expected to bring about the hoped-for change" (Menninger, Mayman, and Pruyser in Sergiovanni, 2004, "Hope and Wishful Thinking" section, para. 1).

But this requires us to do the necessary individual-level work to make Sergiovanni's claim true – that we can be both hopeful and realistic *as long as the possibilities for change remain open*. For my part, I pledge to keep this condition for realistic hope central to my leadership. This is part of the individual-level work that I need to do – and that I challenge each of us to do as well.

So what does it take, and what is at stake – for the students, staff, and faculty of Channel Islands, and for our community partners in education, industry, government, and more – to ensure that "possibilities for change remain open"?

- We need to be forward-looking – working now to be the CSUCI that we envision for those who will be learning and working here in 2042. We must develop that vision, with openness to new possibilities. And to be forward-looking…
- …we need to be *conflict-competent* – understanding the essential role of conflict in progressive change at intrapersonal, interpersonal, and systemic levels. And to be conflict competent…
- …we need to value dissent – while ensuring that we engage our differences productively, in *data-informed* and *solutions-focused* ways. In doing this, we must learn to overcome our conditioned, reflexive, and defensive responses in the most difficult spaces and situations, and to *reach* for each other – bridging our differences with care, compassion, and curiosity. And to value dissent…
- …we need to be a diverse, equitable, inclusive, and accessible campus – knowing fully that we will not and cannot achieve our goals unless these values live in the heart of all that we do.

If placing students at the center of the educational experience is the thread that connects us, let it be our shared conviction that it is not our differences that divide us but, rather, the ties that bind. Our diversity of identities, cultures, methodologies, ways of knowing, ways of being, and more – all brought to bear in achieving our common mission. This is a healthy and hopeful place to be.

Reference

Sergiovanni, T. J. (2004, May 1). Building a community of hope. *Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development*, 61: 8. Retrieved from https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/building-a-community-of-hope