

Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for attending the 2025 State of the University Address. I'm excited to share with you my perspectives on, and aspirations for, this incredible institution. Since the last time we met in this context, The University of Akron has grown, and with that momentum, I enthusiastically share with you today. As I stated this past August 25th, there is much to celebrate about this place and its people. We enter the next era for UA with a refreshed brand, a renewed culture and a time-tested commitment.

On December 2nd through 4th of 2024, we invited four out-of-town marketing agents to visit The University of Akron. None of the four had been to our campus previously, and to these visitors, their knowledge of this institution and the people who populate it was limited. Sure, they'd researched our strengths, studied our areas for improvement and heard a few anecdotes. Together, they'd compiled the results of a short survey and read about the University in multiple sources of social commentary. Their limited understanding involved dueling perspectives: a deeply loved institution that has a way of pulling people in and holding them tightly, versus, reports of a struggling organization that badly needed to regroup to save itself from its own spiral.

For these visitors to grasp our situation in its truest form, and to build a meaningful brand, a discovery process would be necessary. A tour of our geographic footprint. An audit of our communication and marketing assets. Time spent in our surrounding community. I was informed that fourteen meetings with stakeholder groups would take place. As with any discovery process, understanding our context, our audience and our ultimate purpose would take time. And it *was* time for us to make this move. We were, in many ways, past-due for this objective assessment. As I thought about the themes I wanted to cover today, my mind kept returning to this discovery exercise of ten months ago—to the objective evaluation—to the results of the process—to the heartfelt words of our own people. Today, I will talk about the process of our institutional discovery and invite you to walk alongside me as we discuss where we are, what brought us here and the future implications of where we go next.

"At The University of Akron, you have the opportunity to be someone." This statement, made by a current student during the discovery process, helps us to understand who we are and instills pride in our institutional identity. With an enrollment of more than 15,000, we succeed in helping students identify and understand their own importance, professionally and personally. Home to incredibly strong programs across diverse disciplines, we offer our students big opportunities in an environment scalable to their individual comfort level.

But...collectively...who are we? In a vast institutional enterprise, this question is not easily answered. Each component of the University contributes to our identity, and while I'd love to give an exhaustive list of the attributes that make us who we are, there is certainly not time for that today. Instead, I will highlight some points of pride and encourage you to participate in a discovery process of your own. Discover the differentiators that add value to your programs, and apply those to our new institutional branding. Use this discovered identity to tell your story. And as you tell it, weave those identifying traits into the fabric of our UA narrative.

As we begin to enumerate the YES opportunities we provide to students, our story and our value become more apparent. The University of Akron is one of the best in Ohio—in the Midwest—in the US. We know

this, but not *just* because the rankings tell us so. We know it, because this is our educational and work home. We're internationally revered for strong academic programs. Last season alone, our athletics teams won six conference championships—five in the MAC and one in the Big East. We live our identity, and we see the outcomes proven time and again by our current students and alumni.

We are a national research leader with world-renowned faculty and patent producers. Students find their YES and benefit from our robust record in career outcomes, student life programs, professional development, athletics, fine arts and more. As a leading institution in online programs, we are giving our students viable options in learning platforms, and we're doing so affordably and realistically. We're asking our students to trust us with a multi-year financial commitment, and as top alumni earners in Northeast Ohio and beyond, The University of Akron is affirmatively providing strong return on investment.

Akron is a leader in access...access to educational programs and unique opportunities built into our identity as the intellectual center of our city. And the surrounding community *relies* on us. We are a frontrunner in workforce development—for healthcare, industry, law, business, education and so much more.

With early access to internships, co-ops, practical experience and community engagement, our students start and finish their college education in expanded classrooms that transcend the walls of our campus buildings. And our affordable access extends to a variety of prospective students, with smart scholarships, realistic housing costs, opportunities to both commute and maintain involvement, and to do something no one else in an entire student's family has ever done—obtain a higher education.

Through the discovery process I mentioned earlier, we heard time and again that our students are ambitious go-getters who appreciate the personalized attention our faculty and staff tailor to support their individual educational goals.

Our urban campus is another identifying feature to be embraced. It increases our access to a variety of opportunities and exposes students to the social realities their academic programs can equip them to repair. At The University of Akron, we have the responsibility to reframe the misguided perceptions that incorrectly identify our location as a negative. It is time that the public perception honestly aligns with our true identity. We are an integral part of a community that needs us and simultaneously feeds us. In large part, *because of* our location, our students are given the opportunity to be catalysts for change. They drive those changes, pragmatically, to the benefit of our contemporary society.

In discovering our identity, I invite you to join me in reshaping our institutional reputation to match our potential—not dwell on the perceptions of the past. *Simply stated, our identity crisis needs to end now.* Together, let's commit to a revitalized University of Akron built around our discovered identity.

As we are thinking about our opportunity to shift the conversation, I'd like to draw your attention to another soundbite from the discovery process of last December. "People don't know what to think about us...so they *don't* think about us."

Now that we've highlighted just a few features of our identity, we must now consider our challenges and the barriers that are keeping us from achieving maximized efficacy.

Reflect upon the truth of this discovery statement: "The University of Akron doesn't need to try to be something we're not. We just need to be ourselves." In those words, we discover our authenticity. Being authentically Akron is not always easy. It never has been. It necessitates admitting mistakes and attempting to deconstruct barriers that have historically limited our potential.

Our enrollment growth this fall is a testament to the shifting public perception. Our increased headcount opens the doors for discussions of vibrancy, rather than discussions of stagnancy. And, with nearly 10% more first-time, first-year students than we had this time last year, our characterization of a thriving educational environment is, for the first time in many years...authentic.

Since our founding, 155 years ago, there has always been a market of students who are looking for exactly what The University of Akron has to offer. In fact, that population seems to be *increasing*. It is evidenced not only by our freshman class who realized we were a top choice at the beginning of their college career, but it is also built into the growing number of transfer students. The message is clear: UA is a viable, desirable choice for students of all types. Many of them unknowingly chose an institution where they were just a number. Some realized later on the value of being close to home. Our reputation as affordable and accessible is spreading, and we can take a moment to breathe and be authentically ourselves.

I have often shared with educational partners, families and students alike that the University fares well when we're in the conversation in the first place. Being a hidden gem, which we authentically are, is not a smart business strategy. As we discover our institutional authenticity, perhaps our largest challenge is the initial process of entering the conversation for prospective students.

That's where our marketing efforts, high visibility and consistency count the most. I am confident we will make significant strides as the department traditionally called "University Communications and Marketing" transitions into the University's "Brand Management Organization" under the direction of Chief Brand Officer Katy Brennan.

During the campus discovery process, multiple individuals highlighted the University's integration of old and new, the blending of a city and a campus, describing our situation as "compelling." And, as the fourth oldest state university in Ohio, we've been compelling since 1870.

Recently, in a social media post, I referred to the University as being "so back," and I've seen similar statements in numerous other contexts. But, I'm not sure "back" is the right word. Something I'm certain of...the sleeping giant has been awakened. When I first became dean at the CoB, I had recently left the hyperbolic world of sports to join academia. The initial observation I shared with colleagues was that, "Being the best kept secret isn't the best strategy for growth." I hope that feeling is catching on.

The fact is, the University has been a steady companion for our surrounding city for fifteen and a half decades. And while our confidence and esteem have been objectively shaken, we must now evolve as a

primary economic, intellectual and cultural contributor. These advancements will not represent new roles for our institution...they are simply redefined as consistently and authentically...Akron.

With an understanding of how we will continue to discover identity and authenticity, we must contemplate our aspirations for the future. In short, as an institution, we must use our self-reflection process in the immediate short- and long-term to *discover possibility*.

If we've conducted our discovery process properly, the future should not present the questions of who are we or how we want to be perceived. Rather, the pertinent question is, with this knowledge, where can we go? More fitting, perhaps, is the question of, "Where *can't* we go?"

Since my presidency began in May of 2024, I have discussed with the campus my aspirations toward comprehensive growth. I'd like to explain this in greater detail today. To understand the state of the university and our institutional priorities, growth must remain the central focal point. In keeping with the theme of our December 2024 discovery process, I have one more stakeholder quotation. When describing The University of Akron, a student simply stated, "Here, no one has to do it alone."

That is the clearest message I have for you today—we are in the discovery process together. We are in the strategy, visioning and planning process together. As I've stated before, the University faces a variety of challenges, but those are counteracted by a variety of opportunities.

While I have selected just a few areas of possibility to highlight, my wish is for all of you to help in shaping UA's future. As we think about comprehensive growth, I'd like to outline five key areas: enrollment, finances, reputation, personal development and campus beautification.

First priority, as you might expect, is **continued enrollment growth**.

I have challenged campus leadership to build consistency and strategy around recruiting and student retention. I have requested clear alignment in the areas of admissions, enrollment management and brand management, to identify high-priority geographic locations. Now is the time to initiate purposeful and fruitful enrollment campaigns with specific target markets. We are going to double-down on our efforts outside of our immediate six-county region, enhance engagement with Akron Public Schools and other nearby "feeder" districts, and create accessibility routes for transfer students to continue the momentum of the past two years.

As you probably know, the great majority of our students hail from the six counties immediately adjacent to the University. We need to do a better job extending our reach and showcasing the institution as an affordable and viable option unbounded by geography. We will work with units across campus on recruitment and retention strategies that are parallel to our revitalization plan. As we did last year, we will continue to push to lead the regional timelines for student admissions acceptance and financial aid notifications.

Second, **revenue growth and financial confidence**.

Part and parcel to enrollment growth is our net tuition revenue which is the primary driver of institutional income. In addition to revenues from tuition, we are financially dependent on earning the confidence of our donors and continuing to cultivate the institution's advancement. We must demonstrate to the firms and credit agencies that we are a reliable, strong investment for large, transformational initiatives. Since I was appointed 17 months ago, leadership has been strategizing potential methods for monetizing some of our campus spaces and assets. In collaboration with a larger statewide endeavor to reduce the spatial footprints of the state institutions, the University has found ways to sell properties and reduce maintenance costs of buildings that no longer fit our needs.

As part of our revitalization plan, in coordination and collaboration with our Board of Trustees, we are already several months into a budget improvement plan that simultaneously reduces UA's debt burden and raises investor trust. Through this year and the subsequent two fiscal years, the university's reliance on reserves will be dramatically lessened, allowing us to maximize resource stewardship and accountability.

The third growth area is **reputational**.

Now is the time to capitalize upon our refreshed brand, as well as the discovered institutional identity and authenticity I mentioned earlier, all key catalysts to renewed organizational culture. Not only do we want to increase the notoriety of our academic offerings throughout the region, but we also want to spread the good word in national and international markets.

As we improve the student life and build out unique student opportunities, we will continue to create partnerships to amplify the 360-degree educational experience. We have committed to aligning athletic spending in a way that reduces cost and maintains a strong competitive level across sports and teams.

Perceptions of the University are often driven by the institutional stories readily accessible to the community. As such, it is vital that UA continue to foster relationships with local media to ensure the inclusion of our positive stories, initiating a long-overdue earned media campaign. Through owned and social media, we will amplify our differentiators and exceptional programs by meeting students, families, educational partners and the greater community on their preferred platforms. As I mentioned previously, it is essential to develop a consistent, across-the-board endeavor to reframe, reshape and expand positive qualitative perceptions of The University of Akron.

Fourth, **career growth and development** are essential across the University enterprise.

As you all know, the faculty and staff who contribute to the University's mission are the institution's currency. To maximize student success, we must spend and invest in ways that grow the careers of our people. Our strategic goal of flourishing people has multiple meanings. While we certainly ensure the success of our students, we must also allow colleagues to grow. This ensures individual professional

development and proportionally grows the institution, improves public perceptions and ultimately defines our effectiveness.

As the University's president, it is important for me to stimulate a positive culture that will foster a collective attitude open to transformation, institutional change and steady growth. Colleagues should have agency to advance their careers and propel a holistic institutional well-being. As a natural byproduct of these efforts, we hope to accomplish a collective sense of institutional pride and individual validation, both in support of our student-centered mission.

Finally, the fifth growth area is in **facilities upgrades and campus beautification**.

We've already begun earnest efforts toward a facilities plan for improved student experience and workplace satisfaction. The pride we take in keeping our campus operable and beautiful is a direct reflection of our desire to thrive. As you know, we have incredible, and in many ways, unique infrastructure and features that can be leveraged to augment the on-campus experience. This is important for all in-person stakeholders and visitors, an effort that will truly elevate our entire community.

The University of Akron is once again ranked number one in the world for polymer science and plastics engineering, a fitting tribute to an educational institution that will be a key member of our area's Polymer Industry Cluster. Our role in increasing the research, development and production of polymer technologies cannot be overstated. This reputation is driving our next planned construction project—the buildout of the on-campus polymer facility that will service one of just three Ohio Innovation Hubs.

Strong, revenue-generating enrollment, financial sustainability, renewed culture and career confidence, and a beautified campus are all priorities for The University of Akron as we reach the midpoint of another fall semester.

Although we have begun our 156th year, there are still so many aspects of this incredible institution left to discover. Through reviewing the many facets of our identity, expressing a reminder of our authenticity, and articulating our unwavering hope for a future of exceptional possibility, our discovery process is bound to continue.

As I look out upon this room of outstanding colleagues and institutional stakeholders, I am confident in the state of the university. This confidence is not simply derived from facts and figures that can be displayed in a neat and tidy spreadsheet. Rather, it is the result of a shared commitment to serve the interests of our students and solidify our institutional foundation.

It is the collective respect for this place and the talents and passions of our people. It is about the vast social and intellectual impact of The University of Akron. It is the spirit that resonates from our "Go Zips!" narrative. Fiat Lux, Akron. Let there be light in our discovery.