Opening Day Remarks – Keene State College
President Anne E Huot
August 19, 2013

Good Morning and Welcome! It is wonderful to see you all and hear
the lively chatter among you. I am thrilled to be here, at this moment
and in this place. My heart is filled with joy and from my perch I see a
future that is bright, a community that is hopeful and an educational
institution that is the jewel among the University System of New
Hampshire and public liberal arts colleges across the country.

We have much to celebrate, brag about and take rightful pride in. And
all of that is testimony to the dedication, commitment and hard work of
each and every one of you. You are the primary stewards of Keene
State College and your passion for our students’ education; their
welfare and their personal development make us special and contribute
to an inviting and transformational educational environment. Dare I
say one that is second to none?

I give my accolades and thanks to President Helen Giles-Gee and those
that came before her. Their stewardship of Keene State College has
created an impressive foundation on which to build as we look to the
future and the next chapter of our history. The direction that President
Giles-Gee set is premised on academic excellence and during her tenure
here, you have become well known for a curriculum that is centered on
engaged learning.

I believe that the integrated studies program, the 4-credit curriculum
and the integration of the high impact practices are important
directions for us to continue to pursue. I do appreciate that this work is
not yet finished and not yet done to our satisfaction and there is room for additional growth, refinement, and improvement.

Let me start with introductions and begin with my partner in life Dr. Joanne Cepelak. While I rarely presume to speak for her, we both extend to you a heartfelt thank you for the warm welcome that we have received since we moved into the College Residence.

I think we have experienced several of the top ten most stressful life experiences in the past few months. The genuine and warm welcome you have given us has eased our transition and reduced that stress. We have been overwhelmed by the outpouring of good wishes and greatly appreciate the inclusivity of that welcome. I will come back to our College as an inclusive community later in my remarks.

Will our new faculty and staff please stand. Welcome, or as I learned last Friday from some of our new faculty, welcome back to Keene State College. You join a dedicated workforce and a caring community. One in which we hope you thrive and continue your own professional development.

Let me also introduce the executive leadership team of the College. Dottie Morris, Chief Officer of Diversity and Multiculturalism; Maryann Lindberg, Vice President for Advancement; Andy Robinson, Vice President for Student Affairs; Melinda Treadwell, Interim Provost & Vice President for Academic Affairs – Melinda, thank you for answering the call to serve when Mel left; and Jay Kahn, Vice President for Finance & Planning – and Jay, thank you for stepping in to serve as interim president when Helen departed.
The tenets of shared governance are the underpinnings of the integrity of the academy. It is something that I have committed myself to throughout my career and I deeply value the practice of good shared governance. Shared governance is also important to how we chose our leaders and it is a time tested tradition in the academy.

Done well, open searches allow the community of stakeholders to identify the key attributes necessary to be successful in a position, to vet the candidates against those attributes, and, in turn, gives the successful candidate the confidence of the community.

As you know, a two-year appointment was made to the position of provost when Mel left. Its intention was to cross the transition period from President Giles-Gee to the new president and that term ends with this academic year. The position of provosts is critical. It is in my opinion the key vice presidency and I believe the College will be best served in the long term by conducting a national search this year.

As the new President of Keene State College my year has already been and will continue to be filled with important firsts. Today is my first opportunity to introduce a faculty member who has had the honor of Distinguished Teacher of the Year bestowed upon him by our Alumni Association -- an award that recognizes excellence in teaching; encouragement of independent thinking; rapport with students in and out of the classroom; and effective advising.

It is a distinct pleasure to introduce Professor Patrick Dolenc as the 2013 Distinguished Teacher. Professor Dolenc earned bachelor degrees in economics and political science and a doctorate in economics from the University of Utah. He joined our faculty in 1991. Dr. Dolenc
provides us with an exemplary model of the power of teaching and mentoring. In the words of two of his students:

“He is the teacher I always imagined I would meet...Patrick Dolenc’s care for Economics, want for his students to learn and comprehend the subject, and his constant involvement on campus in groups and organizations...has inspired me.” And, “Professor Dolenc taught me more than just Economics, he taught me how to learn.” This is indeed high praise. Please join me in congratulating Professor Patrick Dolenc.

Exploring the opportunity to become the 10th President of Keene State College was a thrilling journey. When I received the call asking me to consider the opportunity I thought, “Who gets to have their dream job, be of service in support of a mission you are passionate about, AND go home?” And then I thought, why not me? A liberal arts college that delivers a high quality, high touch education in a highly residential environment spoke volumes to me.

And then I had the chance to meet the search committee and the campus. The moment I entered the room where the search committee was working, I knew that something special was happening. The campus interview was a joyous whirlwind and reinforced even further my growing sense that my destiny and yours were going to align.

After my appointment I traveled quite a bit on the east coast. I was bowled over by how many people I interacted with said something like “Wow! Keene State College, that’s an amazing place. My son, my daughter, my parents went there. I loved it there and go back often. The professors there are all about the students.” They also told me they go back frequently to visit and they speak with passion about their
time there. Our reputation outside of New Hampshire is very strong and it bodes well for our future.

I am one of seven and I grew up in a working class family in Manchester and I am a first generation college student. I am eternally grateful to my parents for the focus on values and the importance of living a value-centered life.

Among those values, two are particularly relevant to my journey here. One, giving back and being of service as a way of life is essential to being an engaged citizen of one’s community. And, being engaged in one’s community is a means of improving the lives of others.

Two, education often is the passport to economic opportunity. An educated citizenry has a direct and positive impact on the vitality of a community. As the President of Keene State College and working with you, we have the opportunity to continue to educate students to be good stewards of their communities. These are the things that drew me to submit my letter of interest.

I understand and have experienced the sacrifices that others made to ensure my success. I have benefitted from outstanding, caring mentors who helped me find my way. I have much in common with many of our students. And, I built my academic career around creating environments in which students would thrive.

I share your passion for the skill development that is the underpinning of an excellent liberal arts education and I am committed to that mission. The honing of the habits of the mind – creativity, communication, critical thinking, to name a few – is the value added of
the liberal arts education and it is as relevant today as it was a hundred years ago.

I chose to come to Keene State College because I believe that my values align with yours and those that are inherently imbedded in our mission. I want to take this opportunity to affirm that our core values and mission will continue to be the bellwether that will guide us forward. I also want to definitively state that what we do here during my tenure, which I hope will be long and fruitful, will be the product of practicing excellent shared governance, being genuine and transparent, and conducting the work of the President with the utmost integrity.

If my mother were here today she would simply say, “We are on this journey together, we are going forth together, and we will collectively decide the best course of action through dialogue, respectful debate, and testing of ideas.”

Let me turn now to some of what I heard during the interview process. We are spread thin, we want to do good work, we care deeply about the College, we are doing more with less, we’re tired, we sometimes feel under-appreciated, and we worry about the economic vitality of the College given our reliance on enrollment and the demographic changes facing our region, our State, and the nation.

These themes are being echoed across colleges and universities throughout the country. And while understanding that we are not alone provides context, it does not change our own reality and how we react to it. We must find a way to reduce stress and create the capacity to deliver the promise of our mission as effectively and efficiently as possible.
During this coming year we will examine our processes and look for opportunities to focus our efforts. And although it will be a longer process we must reinvest in our human capital which will require us to have an entrepreneurial spirit that leads to enhanced revenue streams to better support our core mission.

Earlier this summer I sent out a communication calling your attention to some of the work being done around the College Residence. Our goal was to create an open and welcoming feel. And on that note, we have become rather fond of the temporary fence on Appian Way. It would be hard to have the home more open than that! Joanne and I look forward to hosting you at a wide range of events in the residence. Watch your mailboxes for an invitation!

We also wanted to let our very capable Grounds crew address some overdue issues with some of the plantings that were no longer viable. Let me pause for a moment and ask our Grounds crew and Physical Plant staff to stand and be recognized, not only for the excellent work they did on the residence, but importantly, for their heroic efforts in these past few weeks to prepare our campus to welcome our students and open the year.

Since my arrival I have been on a listening tour which will continue well into the fall and early spring. My goal is to understand from your vantage point, as well as that of our external constituents, what Keene State’s greatest opportunities and challenges are. We begin that tour in earnest today through our facilitated conversations after lunch. I’ll have more to say on that in a moment.

There will be two other primary opportunities for you to join the tour and offer your thoughts. One, there will be a series of coffee hours
during which you will have the opportunity to talk with me on a wide range of subjects. In addition to hearing from you, it is also another opportunity for us to get to know each other. Watch your mail for details on how to sign up for one of these and please do sign up. Your voice is important and in fact it is necessary.

Second, you will be receiving an electronic questionnaire that aims to give everyone the opportunity to weigh in on important questions about where we are and where we might go. Again, please make the time to contribute to the survey. I cannot overstate how important I believe it is to hear from each and every one of you as I continue my listening tour.

I also plan to reach out to our local community leaders, business leaders, alumni and friends, as well as our state and local government officials. This work has already begun and will continue throughout my time here. I believe in and value the notion that our future and the future of our region are inter-dependent and I look forward to building on the already strong relationships that exist between the College and the community.

Continuing to build our external partnerships with employers, the community, with city and state elected officials, with educators and educational leaders, with community action and service agencies, with alumni and with donors is an area of great opportunity and will be essential to ensuring a robust and enduring future. Inherent in that is continuing to encourage people to invest in Keene State College by supporting us financially and expanding our network by engaging others in our exciting work.
Some of you, perhaps just a few, may be saying to yourself we have had several campus-wide conversations about important topics, we put our energy into it, and we haven’t seen the product of those conversations. I make two promises to you today. One, I will review recent past efforts and consider them part of my listening tour. And two, not only will you have access to the results of our work this afternoon and the survey, but what comes out of that will be reflected upon and used as the starting point for a visioning process intended to take the long view about Keene State College and our future.

Perhaps others among you wonder what change will happen and how it will affect you. I think of it more as progress, the evolution of enduring mission, and innovation. This is the natural and necessary evolution of any organization and, in particular, any place of learning, because the way we learn evolves over the generations. And, it would happen whether you had a new president or not.

My arrival gives us an opportunity to take a fresh look at ourselves and examine our core mission and future within the context of the myriad of challenges facing higher education today. What matters is the extent to which we envision that future together, create a shared understanding of our challenges, and generate the wisdom and energy to manage those challenges in ways that take us forward and make our College even stronger.

I need you to be with me on this journey. Your participation will be what creates a bold and aspirational vision for this chapter of our history. And, it is the essential element that ensures that the enduring nature of our College thrives despite devastating economic times and unprecedented challenges facing higher education today.
I want to share with you now my hopes and aspirations for Keene State College. In a nutshell that aspiration is for Keene State College to advance its reputation as a leading liberal arts college for the 21st century, an institution that leads the dialogue rather than chases the idea of the moment, and one that is recognized for understanding and articulating what student success means within the context of our mission.

Importantly, a College that is recognized for delivering on its promise to students and inspiring them to achieve their personal best, to engage in deep learning, and to go forth to serve as engaged citizens. Our journey toward this aspiration will be challenging and it will require us to be entrepreneurial in spirit and, when appropriate, to take some risk.

Our journey is also fraught with challenge. We live in a time of unprecedented scrutiny that threatens our very purpose and, left unchecked, will widen the achievement gap and leave behind the very students that Keene State College has served throughout its history.

Much rhetoric and scrutiny questions the value of higher education against the context of readiness for employment. Many in positions of influence champion workforce development as the purpose, perhaps the only purpose, of pursuing a college degree. This, more than anything else, challenges us.

We must find a way to lead a dialogue that helps our stakeholders understand that education and training in one’s discipline is a necessary, but not sufficient, outcome of a college education. Higher education has always prepared students to lead successful and economically satisfying lives.
But it is the essence of a liberal arts education that makes the difference in the long-term opportunity of the student to excel, give back, and engage. And importantly, the skills developed as an outcome of that liberal arts education are, in fact, what employers and business leaders say they need. And so, we are challenged to articulate our purpose in a manner that meets our stakeholders where they are and reinforces that a Keene State education directly responds to the call to develop the workforce by providing a transformational education.

The second major challenge is the unprecedented dis-investment in public higher education from local, state, and federal sources. The drop in support is precipitous and it has forced public colleges and universities across the nation to increase the cost of attendance for our students. This is a trend that we must find a solution to.

In our case, raising the resources to supplement the financial aid we are able to offer our students must be a paramount priority for all of us. It is also premised on the assumption that we are not efficient in the delivery of our product and that there are ways to reduce costs. Such statements are frequently followed with a reference to online learning.

These arguments fail to appreciate that a high touch, highly residential environment provides a quality experience that cannot be replicated in an online environment. And they fail to understand that traditional age students and students from disadvantaged backgrounds not only need that environment to learn and develop in, they want it. The students understand that a college education is much more than the delivery and consumption of information.

We must make our case for the value of what we do. Indeed, when compared with many liberal arts colleges, ours is great quality at an
excellent value. With that said, I think two other related points are germane. One, technology is part of the world. It is part of how we access information and it is part of how students learn. The question that faces us is, “What role can and should technology play in our pedagogy?” It is also an increasingly important tool for doing our business effectively and efficiently.

Two, ours is a high cost model; one that I believe has an important place in the landscape for higher education that is evolving. It is imperative that we develop revenue streams to better support our model of education.

And while there are others, the third and final challenge I will comment on today is the dramatic change in demographics that is upon us. The college completion rate in our state, and the nation for that matter, is low. And those that are completing do not reflect the racial, ethnic, and economic background of our communities, our state, and our nation.

Keene State College has a rich and long history of serving students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and students who are first generation students. The complexion of these potential students has changed and we must prepare our college to be a model college with respect to diversity and inclusion.

This will require us to think differently about how we do what we do in our business practice, our support services, our living environment, our student life program, and our classrooms.

I truly believe that public higher education is a public good. It is a right and is dangerously close to becoming a privilege; one that will leave out
much of our society or relegate their education to the massive online course movement. While that is appropriate, to be sure, for certain types of education, what you have access to should not be determined by your socio-economic status.

This brings me to a framework for our facilitated conversations today. The purpose as indicated earlier is to gather information as part of the listening tour and to do so around the challenges that I have outlined for us today within the context of our mission.

When you entered the room you were given a piece of paper that has on one side your room assignment for the afternoon discussions. I hope that if you are able you will participate. Again, I cannot over emphasize the importance of having everyone’s voice in the dialogue.

When you get to lunch you will find some index cards on your table with two questions. One deals with our public liberal arts mission. The second deals with the question of student success.

Let me pause to share a view I hold, that is held by many national leaders about student success. Colleges and universities that are able to articulate the definition of student success within the context of their mission and deliver on that promise are successful because they take a horizontal approach to ensuring student success even though our structures are vertical.

Every person in this room has an important role to play in the success of our students. Each and every one of you has a stake in the success of our students and if we are able to integrate our efforts horizontally across the college we will have achieved a milestone that will move us toward being a leading liberal arts college for the 21st century.
Returning to where we started, I am filled with hope and optimism about our future. We get to write the next chapter of our history and we get to determine the future. It will not be determined by the circumstances of the day, but rather by a committed group of faculty, staff, alumni, partners, and friends who believe in access to a quality public liberal arts education.

We know what our strengths are, we understand the challenges we face, but the vision we build together can be secured if we work with purpose and commitment. For my part, I will advocate tirelessly for our College and deliver our message at every opportunity.

Thank you for coming this morning. I would be pleased to take any questions you may have.