

# STATE *of the* UNIVERSITY ADDRESS *with* President Carolyn R. Lepre

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Guerrieri Academic Commons,  
Assembly Hall



## *Celebrating a Century of Salisbury University*

Good afternoon!

Thank you for joining me today as we celebrate another remarkable year at Salisbury University. This year, we are also commemorating something far more enduring: 100 years of academic excellence, service, and transformation. A century of education, leadership, and growth. A century of Salisbury University.

This is a year unlike any other. Our Centennial gives us a rare and powerful opportunity to look back on where we've been, to stand firmly in the present, to measure our impact, and to chart a bold path forward. And that's what today is all about: celebrating the spirit that binds us together across time and the unwavering belief that what happens at Salisbury changes lives.

You'll hear stories this afternoon that illustrate that truth – stories of students seizing opportunities, of faculty pursuing knowledge and sparking curiosity, of staff building a campus environment where everyone can succeed and thrive. These stories aren't just part of our history; they are our legacy in the making.

Salisbury. Forever. is more than a theme. It is a promise. A declaration that what we build here – knowledge, character, opportunity – echoes across generations.

I want to take a moment to recognize the many individuals and groups who make Salisbury University the exceptional institution it is.

To our elected officials, community leaders, donors, and alumni who are here with us today: Thank you for your ongoing support and belief in our mission.

To our faculty and staff: SU's excellence has always started with you. From our faculty's tireless dedication to academic excellence that shapes the minds and future of our students, to our staff who so often work behind the scenes providing critical support to our students, campus, and beyond, your impact is seen and felt every single day.

To our students who each bring their own unique talents, perspectives, and aspirations to our campus. You are the reason we are here. You are the reason our future will be even brighter.

Each of you contributes to our shared story, and I am so grateful to be on this journey with you.

And as we move into this next century, I am pleased to welcome two new outstanding leaders to our campus. Following robust and

thoughtful national searches, I would like to introduce our new General Counsel Mark Romano and our new Vice President for Student Affairs Dr. Amy Johnson.

Mark comes to us from the Department of the Navy where he has served as the Counsel for the Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps – the chief civilian legal officer of the Marine Corps – since 2021.

Amy joins us from the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill, where she has served as vice chancellor for student affairs since 2020.

Mark is here in attendance today, and Amy is watching from afar. Please join me in welcoming them to our Sea Gull family!

I would also like to recognize Dr. Jennifer Nyland, who will be stepping in as the interim dean of the Clarke Honors College. Thank you, Dr. Nyland, for your leadership and your willingness to serve the university in this important role.

### **A Look Back: Our People**

What has always set Salisbury University apart is our people. Since welcoming our first class of 105 aspiring teachers in 1925, we have grown into a vibrant, student-centered university that now enrolls more than 7,200 students – each with their own story, their own goals, and their own dreams for the future.

This year, we welcomed 7,243 total students, including 6,477 undergraduates and 766 graduate students. Our newest Sea Gulls reflect both the depth and distinction of the SU community. The Class of 2029 brings together students from 36 states and 42 countries. Nearly one-third identify as from underrepresented backgrounds, and more than a third are the first in their family to attend college – profound proof that SU continues to open doors and expand access to life-changing opportunities.

These students are not only diverse in background, but ambitious in purpose. From first-year undergraduates to doctoral candidates, our students arrive with a commitment to learning and a desire to make an impact. Among our new students this year were 1,441 first-time undergraduates, 509 transfer students, and 313 new master's students – including students who are among the earliest cohorts in growing programs like engineering physics and public communication.

We remain committed to smart, intentional growth. Our strategic

goal remains to reach an enrollment of 8,200 students, including increasing the proportion of graduate students to 12% of the student body. This year's incoming class shows that we are on track to meet that goal.

What unites this diverse and dynamic student population is a shared pursuit of something greater than themselves – a desire to belong to a community where excellence is personal, opportunity is real, and every story matters. This has been true for a century. It must remain true for the next.

Our university's continued excellence is made possible by the people who live its mission every day. This year, we celebrated the many accomplishments and milestones of the faculty, staff, and students who shape our campus.

During our Faculty and Staff Service Awards ceremony, we honored 168 dedicated individuals for their enduring commitment to the university, marking more than 2,200 combined years of service to our institution. These recognitions serve as a powerful reminder that the heart of SU is built on decades of dedication, innovation, and care.

Drs. Echo Leaver, Erin Stutelberg, and Deneen Long-White were honored with the 2025 University System of Maryland (USM) Board of Regents Faculty Award for Excellence – one of the system's highest distinctions. Drs. Leaver and Stutelberg were recognized for outstanding teaching, while Dr. Long-White was acknowledged for her impactful public service. Continuing this tradition of academic excellence, Dr. Isabel Quintana Wulf earned the Faculty Award for Excellence in Teaching for 2026, further reflecting SU's commitment to student-centered learning.

Among staff honorees, Michelle Lambert received the 2025 USM Staff Award for Excellence in the "Acting as a Role Model" category. This year, the USM has recognized Cyndi Funkhouser for her dedication as a "Team Player" and Nancy Talbott Holton for her "Excellence in Performance." Congratulations to all for their remarkable contributions!

This year has also been a landmark one for our students. From the 2,150 students named to the fall 2025 Dean's List to our student-athletes who have showcased both academic and athletic achievement.

For example, our athletics program and student-athletes participated in 10 NCAA tournament appearances –including six hosted at SU – and received 20 All-American honors, 25 All-Region honors, two Regional Players of the Year, six conference championships, 177 All-Conference awards, five Conference Coaches of the Year, eight Conference Players of the Year, and one Conference Rookie of the Year – just to name a few – highlighting a year of exceptional talent and dedication across the university.

The accomplishments we honor today are only a small few that span our decades of service, excellence, impact, and success. As we reflect on these achievements, we are reminded that SU's strength has always been its people.

## **A Look Back: Academic Excellence and World-Class Faculty and Facilities**

Academic excellence isn't just a benchmark – it's a tradition. And for a century, SU has empowered students through rigorous academics, visionary faculty, and purpose-built facilities that elevate learning beyond the classroom. This past year was no exception.

This fall, we successfully completed our reaccreditation review with the Middle States Commission on Higher Education – the body that ensures institutions receiving federal funding meet the highest standards of quality, governance, and effectiveness.

After a rigorous, campuswide self-study and external review, SU was reaffirmed as fully meeting each of these standards, without any required recommendations – something very uncommon – and which validates the quality of an SU degree and confirms that our academic and operational practices are operating at the highest level of effectiveness and compliance. I thank everyone involved in the Middle States process, especially Drs. Kara Raab and Jessica Clark for spearheading the reaccreditation process.

As in previous years, SU continues to earn national recognition for excellence. This year, our graduate programs stood out in particular as U.S. News & World Report ranked our online M.B.A., Master of Science in Nursing, and master's in education programs among the nation's best, underscoring the quality, impact, and flexibility of our offerings. And in a historic milestone, Fortune magazine ranked SU's M.B.A. program 30th nationally, a testament to the quality, rigor, and reputation of our Perdue School of Business.

Beyond academics, SU was named one of the 40 most sustainable colleges by The Princeton Review and recognized once again as a top military-friendly school, reflecting our dedication to environmental stewardship and support for student veterans.

## **A Look Back: Culture of Equity and Inclusion**

This past year, we deepened our commitment to creating a campus where everyone feels seen, supported, and valued.

Student-led initiatives like the Multicultural Festival honor and celebrate the rich diversity of our campus while other events such as I Love Salisbury advance equity and access by connecting students to meaningful service projects that support our local region.

Student-athletes contribute to that commitment too, completing more than 3,000 hours of community service each year – a recognition that earned SU the NCAA Community Service Award in 2024, an honor only one Division III University receives each year. Continuing the tradition, we took second place honors in 2025.

On campus, we hosted the Interprofessional Symposium on Transgender Care and Experience for the third year. Led by Rachel Moore, director of the Center for Healthy Communities, and Dr. Michèle Schlehofer, professor of psychology, this annual gathering brings together medical professionals, students, and advocates to expand knowledge and empathy around the healthcare needs of transgender and gender-diverse individuals.

Through the Office of Access and Accommodations' annual Access Awards, 10 faculty, staff, students, and community partners were

recognized for their dedication to removing barriers and creating an environment where individuals of all abilities can succeed. Their work truly represents the best of SU – a community that refuses to let obstacles stand in the way of opportunity.

This spirit truly extends across our entire campus. Last June, we had the chance to celebrate all our employees during our annual Employee Appreciation Day – a wonderful opportunity to recognize the many contributions that keep our university moving forward every day.

I'd especially like to thank Joe Benyish and the entire Staff Senate for organizing such a meaningful day of activities, and I look forward to this year's event, taking place on June 8. Mark your calendars!

These moments remind us that every member of SU contributes to the vibrant, inclusive, and thriving learning environment that we are building together.

### **A Look Back: Distinction and Growth**

We also remain committed to fostering growth and opportunity through our academic programs. Just as we value the contributions of every member of SU, we are equally dedicated to ensuring our students have access to innovative educational pathways that prepare them for the future.

One such pathway is the creation of the Bachelor of Science in coastal engineering, the first program of its kind in the state. With Maryland's thousands of miles of shoreline and the Chesapeake Bay at its heart, this program is preparing graduates to safeguard one of our region's greatest natural resources while addressing the increasing impacts of climate change, erosion, and sea level rise.

We also launched a new biochemistry and molecular biology major, an interdisciplinary program at the intersection of chemistry and biology. By equipping students with critical skills in biomedical research, genetics, and biotechnology, this major supports the growing demand for professionals in health, pharmaceutical, and life sciences fields.

This year, we continued to foster the strong bonds between SU and our broader region, and this commitment was once again recognized with the successful recertification of the prestigious Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement. This honor places SU among just 277 colleges and universities nationwide to hold this designation. More importantly, it underscores the mission of community service that has always guided us.

### **A Look Back: High-Impact Practices and Experiential Learning**

Building on the foundation of our distinction and growth, high-impact practices are the hallmark of a Salisbury education, and our Sea Gulls continue to demonstrate the transformative power of these experiences.

One such Sea Gull is recent graduate Stephora Alberi, who was awarded the prestigious Gates Cambridge Scholarship – one of the most competitive and globally recognized graduate fellowships in the world.

Gates Scholars are chosen not only for academic brilliance, but

for their commitment to improving the lives of others. As just one of 26 scholars selected from thousands of applicants across the nation, Stephora will pursue postgraduate study at the University of Cambridge in England, building on her groundbreaking research in artificial intelligence.

Closer to home, entrepreneurship continued to thrive through the Ratcliffe Foundation Shore Hatchery competition, where student and local entrepreneurs turn bold ideas into real businesses. This fall, innovation took a deeply personal turn. Remember Me Glass, an SU-alum venture, earned the top prize in the competition for its handcrafted memorial art that transforms cremated remains into meaningful glass keepsakes. The venture blends artistry, compassion, and entrepreneurship – demonstrating how business innovation can also carry profound human connection.

And, as always, we're proud of the faculty and students who represent SU internationally through the Fulbright program, like our 2025 cohort of two student award winners and one faculty award winner. This year we're also excited to welcome our first visiting Fulbright Student to campus, deepening our international academic community.

Erragab Eljanhaoui, a Ph.D. student from the University of Ibn Zohr in Agadir, Morocco, is spending his year at SU researching the Nomads of the Sahara and their portrayal, with a focus on 19th-century captivity narratives from Africa's Barbary Coast. Drawing on his Nomadic heritage, Erragab selected SU as a home base to collaborate with African American literature scholar Dr. April Logan and to access archives including the Library of Congress, the Library Company of Philadelphia, and our own Edward H. Nabb Research Center to advance his research.

Erragab's research exemplifies the global scholarship and cross-cultural engagement that the Fulbright Program promotes and we are thrilled that he is here.

### **A Look Back: Raising Resources**

Centennial spirit shaped the momentum of the past year – visible not only in our programs and achievements, but also in the extraordinary generosity of our alumni, partners, and friends.

In Fiscal Year 2025, Salisbury University raised \$14.3 million, marking the largest single year of giving in SU history. This remarkable milestone was made possible by more than 8,200 unique donors, including 3,175 alumni who continue to invest in the institution that shaped their lives.

Even more exciting, SU has raised eight figures once again, the first back-to-back eight-figure fundraising years in the university's history, with \$12.5 million already raised to date.

Last year's annual Giving Day set a new record as well, raising more than half a million dollars – the most ever – in support of 285 campus causes. From scholarships to athletics, academic programs to student organizations, this outpouring of support demonstrates the depth of belief in Salisbury's mission and the power of collective generosity. I hope you all have your calendars marked for this year's Giving Day – April 7!

Public investment also advanced our priorities. The State of Maryland announced \$2 million in funding for planning and pre-construction of the Performing Arts Center, a transformative project that will elevate academic programming, enrich the cultural life of the Eastern Shore, and strengthen our downtown presence.

And excitingly, the Governor's recently proposed budget also includes future funding for the center. And while the budget remains proposed and subject to legislative approval, the inclusion signals strong state confidence in the project, and we are seeing promising signs that state construction funding could be secured sooner than previously anticipated – potentially as early as fiscal year 2028.

This funding reflects growing confidence in SU's vision and the regional impact of this landmark facility, and we are grateful to Governor Moore, the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development, and Secretary Jake Day for their leadership and partnership in making this investment possible.

Philanthropy also shaped the physical beauty and legacy of our campus. Last spring, the SU Arboretum was named in honor of alumna Glenda Chatham Clarke, who was also just recognized with the 2026 Alumni Leadership Award, acknowledging her enduring commitment to the university. This tribute reinforces our commitment to environmental stewardship and creating inspiring spaces for learning and reflection. Glenda and her husband Bob are here today – thank you both for your belief in Salisbury University.

Together, these investments, from individual gifts to state support, are building more than facilities and funds. They are building opportunity. They are building access. They are building Salisbury's future.

Our university's strength has long rested on the belief that when we give, we shape something far greater than ourselves. The record-breaking generosity of this year ensures that the next generation of Sea Gulls will inherit a university stronger than ever before.

### **A Look Back: Institutional Identity and Reputation**

This momentum has allowed us to strengthen and elevate our institutional identity in ways that resonate far beyond campus.

In May, we joyfully held our 100th Spring Commencement, a historic moment for our university. For the first time since the 1970s, commencement returned to campus, allowing graduates to cross the stage in the place they called home. Thousands gathered at Sea Gull Stadium to honor this milestone class.

We were honored to welcome alumnus Dan Quinn, head coach of the Washington Commanders, as our commencement speaker. His message of perseverance, leadership, and belief in oneself embodied the Sea Gull spirit and reminded our graduates – and all of us – that Salisbury's influence extends to the highest levels of achievement. His presence reinforced what we know to be true: SU alumni lead boldly in every arena.

This fall, we teamed up with local favorites to recognize our Centennial – including a special Island Creamery ice cream flavor – appropriately dubbed Sammy's Salis-berry Swirl, and SU-branded Sposato wine and EVO's 'Bury Brew. A portion of the beer sales go toward Salisbury University scholarships – giving everyone both a

delicious and a meaningful way to celebrate our university.

Together, these moments demonstrate that SU is not simply an institution; it is a story and a source of pride that continues to grow in reach and recognition. We are an anchor of our community.

As we conclude our first century, Salisbury stands more visible, more confident, and more connected than ever before. Our identity is rooted in tradition and carried forward by Sea Gulls who proudly represent this University wherever they go.

### **From Pride to Progress**

The impact Salisbury University has made over the last 100 years is undeniable. But the true measure of a university is not only what it has accomplished, it's whether it's prepared for what comes next. Its willingness to respond boldly to the needs of its time. And this is a defining time.

We are proud of our past and now we ask ourselves. What will we choose to build next? Because this moment – our Centennial – is not just a celebration.

It is a threshold. It is the beginning of our next great work. It is where we turn from pride to progress.

Before I share the roadmap for the start of our second century, I invite you to reflect on who we are ... and who we are becoming.

### **From Small Beginnings Come Great Things**

Salisbury University has always been a place where lives are changed, not just in classrooms, but in communities – across the Eastern Shore and far beyond it.

From the very first class of students in 1925 to the thousands who walk this campus today, each generation has carried forward a simple but powerful idea: What we do here matters.

We stand on humble beginnings. By today's standards, we were small. But sometimes big things – great things – have small beginnings.

Our first students were taught by a handful of faculty – just eight teaching faculty in 1925 – in a single main academic building, our beloved Holloway Hall. There were no residence halls. No intercollegiate athletic teams. No research labs, study abroad programs, or entrepreneurship competitions. And believe it or not, no parking problems! Of course, that may be because almost no one had a car yet ... but still.

But what we lacked in size, we made up for in ambition. From the very beginning, Salisbury was founded to serve a purpose larger than itself: To prepare talented, dedicated students, to transform lives, to be the norm – the standard – for exceptional education, and to meet the needs of this region and its people. Our mission has expanded, but at its core, it has never changed.

In the decades that followed our founding, we grew, always with that same sense of purpose. From a Normal School, to State Teachers College, to Salisbury State College, to Salisbury State University, and to, finally, Salisbury University.

Each generation added something new. New programs. New buildings. New traditions. New opportunities for students who dreamed

of doing something meaningful with their lives.

And like every institution that lasts a century, our journey hasn't been without challenges. Among our most significant were near closures of our institution by the state, in 1932 and 1970. But through it all, Salisbury has always done what great institutions do. We adapted, we evolved, and we kept moving forward. Because we did what we have always done best. We respond to the needs of the moment while staying true to our purpose.

### **Writing Our Next Chapter**

While the past tells an extraordinary story, the next chapter stands to be even better. However, this story will not write itself. It requires intention, collaboration, and a clear vision for where we are going next.

Today I am sharing the results of our year-long planning process – a comprehensive draft of our strategic plan for the consideration of our faculty, staff, and students. This marks the beginning of a three-week open comment and feedback period that will commence immediately following this address and will allow for further refinement prior to the plan's official release date of May 1, 2026.

It reflects the hard work and thoughtful contributions of many individuals over the past year, and I want to take a moment to acknowledge the incredible efforts that brought us to this point.

In October 2024, we formed our Strategic Plan Steering Committee, who were at the heart of this monumental and collaborative task, led by Dr. Christy Weer, dean of the Perdue School of Business, and Zebadiah Hall, vice president for inclusion, access, and belonging. This representative body of our campus has done truly remarkable work in researching, planning, listening, and guiding our strategic plan process. To each and every member of the committee, thank you!

Over the past 12 months, hundreds of individuals contributed ideas and their unique perspective. Faculty, staff, students, alumni, and community partners participated in a wide range of conversations about the future of this institution. Thirty listening sessions were held – including several dedicated, independent sessions for faculty, staff, and students – engaging hundreds of campus voices. Five working groups were formed with more than 110 campus members volunteering to participate. And, feedback was regularly solicited and gathered through surveys, meetings, and discussions.

I want to thank everyone who has participated in meaningful ways in this process over the past year. Your time, your expertise, and your willingness to engage thoughtfully with difficult questions have shaped everything within this draft.

This plan emerges from individual insights and from a clear understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing us. Today, the landscape of higher education is changing. The needs of our students are changing. And the challenges facing our region are changing.

Across the country, colleges and universities are navigating growing questions about the value and affordability of a college degree, shifting demographics that are reshaping enrollment, and declining trust in higher education.

Public confidence in higher education has eroded significantly in just

a few short years. National research on this highlights the decline – in 2015, 57% of Americans expressed confidence in higher education. The lowest point came in 2024, with confidence falling to just 36%. The driver of this is society's perception that higher education no longer provides the same level of entry into the workforce as it once did. Couple this with concerns about the cost of attendance and rising student debt, and it is understandable why students and families are asking a simple, but important question: "Will this education truly prepare me for the future?"

Addressing these challenges and preparing students for the future is not work Salisbury does alone. We are engaged in this work in our own unique ways across the University System of Maryland. And as a member of a system, we must frame and map our own strategic plan to the strategic vision set forth by the USM.

The USM's long-term strategic framework, Vision 2030, calls on all 12 universities and three regional centers, SU included, to expand access, improve student success, strengthen workforce alignment, and deepen partnerships with the communities we serve.

At its core, Vision 2030 recognizes something important: That the role of public universities is evolving, and we are measured by outcomes and held accountable to them. As a state institution, we are being measured by whether our students graduate prepared for meaningful lives and careers, by whether our research and innovation support the needs of our communities, and by how we help drive economic mobility and opportunity for the people of Maryland.

As a Maryland public institution, we also must consider how we fit in with the priorities set forth for our state by our elected leaders, such as those Governor Moore has identified as our "lighthouse sectors," including the life sciences and information technology, where the state is concentrating its economic investments.

As the regional comprehensive university of the Eastern Shore, our mission and much of the work being done at SU already aligns closely with the priorities outlined in Vision 2030 and our state's priority areas. As the draft of the strategic plan took shape, an important question guided us: "How can Salisbury help advance the broader goals of the USM and the State of Maryland while staying true to our mission as an institution and the students we serve?"

### **Serving Our Students and Region**

Today's Sea Gulls arrive with remarkable ambition, but also with very real expectations about what higher education should provide. They want an education that is meaningful, an experience that is supportive, and perhaps most importantly, they want help finding the path to their futures.

As they always have, students change over time.

At SU, we have more first generation, Pell, and minority students than ever before. More of our students report needing to work while they are attending school than ever before.

We see students who lived through a global pandemic, the impact of which we still are only beginning to fully understand. National surveys show that current students require more remedial support in core

subjects like math and writing than before.

Eight-eight percent of our fall transfer students arrived with over 60 credit hours, compared to 55% in 2019, a 33 percentage point increase in just six years.

We also need to keep national trends in mind.

In the U.S., one in five undergraduate students are over 30 and nearly 40% are over 25. Demographics are shifting, and the traditionally aged 18-21 year olds who historically made up the vast majority of SU's population are declining.

Students across the country are experiencing high levels of mental health issues, especially centered on anxiety and depression.

Many surveys, such as those done by Gallup, Lumina, and EAB show that the majority of Gen Z students say the main reason for college is getting a better job, that they choose majors primarily for career prospects, and that cost is the top factor in choosing a college.

For those of us who might find these statistics a little depressing, Gen Z also wants meaningful relationships and jobs, a strong sense of community, and a purposeful life – and places like SU remain one of the few places where students can build those connections. In other words, research shows that while students today are career-focused, they are not just motivated by the allure of a big paycheck, they want to find happiness.

Our students' expectations are evolving. Today's students are asking important questions.

And, they are right to ask questions. And, it is our job to show them that the value of higher education today is measured both by what students learn in the classroom and by how well we prepare them for lives of purpose: To be individuals who lead, solve problems, are critical thinkers and good communicators, and work in service to those that need them most.

We are a region at a crossroads. Across our counties:

- Healthcare shortages threaten access to care in our communities. The Lower Eastern Shore experiences some of the highest health inequalities in Maryland, with disproportionately high rates of chronic medical conditions and mental health disorders. In fact, life expectancy is as much as seven years shorter in some Eastern Shore counties than in top-ranked suburban Montgomery County.
- School systems struggle to recruit and retain qualified teachers. Maryland is projected to face more than 5,000 open teaching positions annually, and the state currently produces fewer than 30% of the teachers needed to fill those roles.
- The Eastern Shore, and the State as a whole, faces increasing environmental vulnerability. Sea-level rise, coastal flooding, and declining water quality threaten not only our ecosystems, but also the industries that sustain our communities – from agriculture to tourism, and fisheries. But they also support something more personal: The homes and well-being of thousands of Marylanders who live along our rivers, bays, and coastlines.

- Businesses face workforce gaps that limit growth and innovation. In the fall, BEACON released a survey that listed labor supply and workforce challenges as top barriers to growth and expansion here on the Eastern Shore.

Helping to address these evolving needs is not someone else's responsibility. It is ours. From our founding as a Normal School in 1925, SU has always risen to meet the needs of its time.

So, the task before us is to ensure we continue the great work that has always defined Salisbury University, while preparing intentionally for the opportunities and challenges of what comes next. That is the purpose of a strategic plan.

It is not meant to guide all aspects of our day-to-day work of teaching, scholarship, or creative activity. It also is not meant to constrain innovation or academic freedom. Our faculty must always have the freedom to explore new ideas. Our students must always have the space to discover new possibilities. And our campus must remain a place where creativity and innovation flourish.

Our strategic plan provides a framework for our largest institutional decisions. It guides how we prioritize major investments and initiatives across the university. It informs decisions about where we invest time and resources, and which new programs or initiatives we might launch, and, to communicate the value of our work.

Our mission speaks to our responsibility to provide an exceptional education, to prepare students for meaningful careers and engaged citizenship, and to serve as a catalyst for opportunity and progress across the Eastern Shore and beyond.

But a mission statement alone does not define a university. Our values shape how we bring that mission to life. Our values are reflected in the principles that guide our work every day – our commitment to student success, academic excellence, community engagement, integrity, inclusion, and the belief that education should create opportunity.

### **Salisbury University 2026-2031: Anchoring Our Region, Advancing Our Future**

Today, I am pleased to introduce the draft of Salisbury University's five-year strategic plan: Anchoring Our Region, Advancing Our Future

It is a name that reflects both who we are and the moment we are in. For 100 years, Salisbury University has been a place where futures begin, where students arrive with potential and leave with purpose. And as we look ahead, we know something important.

And that important thing is this: We are not just a university that happens to be located on the Eastern Shore. We are the intellectual, cultural, and economic anchor of the Eastern Shore. That distinction matters, and it is one we are choosing, intentionally, to lean into.

If you look across the landscape of higher education today, most universities speak in broad strokes about things like global impact and excellence in all things. Those things certainly matter. But very few are willing to boldly say that the work we do in this place, in service to this region, is what distinguishes us from the wide range of other universities in the country.

This strategic plan makes an intentional choice:

**Salisbury University will be recognized as Maryland’s model for connecting broad-based foundational learning and intellectual discovery with regional problem-solving and impact, preparing our students for a lifetime of success.**

Let me take a moment to clarify what this means, and what it does not mean. This is not a plan that trades intellectual depth for vocational job training. We are a university, one that is grounded in the liberal arts and sciences, where curiosity is cultivated, where ethical reasoning shapes how our students think, and where our students become life-long learners.

This will never change.

This plan challenges us to prepare students to lead, in their professions, their communities, their civic lives, and in a complex and rapidly changing world by preparing them to apply their knowledge to real-world challenges through experiential learning, research, and community engagement.

We are choosing to be the institution that proves academic excellence and regional commitment are a powerful combination. Our university will serve this place we call home while preparing students to lead anywhere. Our students develop skills and perspectives that have both local impact and are designed for global application, preparing them to solve complex problems wherever their lives, careers, and passions take them.

I won’t walk through every detail of the draft plan this afternoon, but I do want to briefly introduce the four pillars that anchor it.

Pillar One focuses on “Transformational Learning and Academic Excellence that Connects to Real-World Needs.” Salisbury University prepares students to apply their knowledge to real-world challenges through experiential learning, research, and community engagement. We strive to ensure that every student experiences hands-on learning that prepares them to solve the challenges of today and tomorrow. We will prepare graduates not only for employment, but also for informed participation in a democratic society and increasingly interconnected world.

Pillar Two advocates to “Support Students and Their Success at Every Stage.” We strive to create a campus environment where every student is supported, connected, and able to thrive from their first day through graduation and beyond.

Pillar Three states that we will be “A Community-Engaged Campus that Strengthens and Uplifts the Region.” We will intentionally work to deepen our partnerships, such as those with our local healthcare system TidalHealth, across the Eastern Shore so the work of the university directly improves the areas we serve.

Pillar Four reflects our commitment to “Responsible Stewardship for a Strong Future.” Because institutional resources are finite, Salisbury University will prioritize investments that most effectively advance student learning, strengthen academic quality, and increase the university’s positive impact on the region, the State of Maryland, and broader society at large. We will strive to ensure our resources and infrastructure are aligned to sustain SU’s excellence and impact for

generations to come.

Together, these four pillars provide the framework for our plan, guiding how Salisbury University will move forward in its next century.

At the highest levels of the plan are the four pillars you just saw: Each pillar represents a major priority for the university. Within each pillar are a set of goals – the outcomes we are working toward over the next five years and what success looks like.

For example, under Pillar One, one of our goals is to ensure that every undergraduate and graduate student has access to high-impact experiential learning opportunities before they graduate. We already see this happening through our General Education Experiential Learning requirement, and it is being realized in remarkable ways through internships, undergraduate research, clinical placements, study abroad programs, and community-engaged learning. This plan simply ensures that those opportunities remain a defining feature of a Salisbury education.

Under Pillar Two, we have incorporated goals that aim to remove institutional, financial, and structural barriers to student success and to improve student outcomes. We emphasize strategies like integrating advising, coaching, and early alert systems across the student lifecycle.

Under Pillar Three, we’ve set a goal to strengthen our role as a cultural and civic hub for the Eastern Shore. A major example of this is the continued planning and development of the downtown Performing Arts Center, which will expand opportunities for student learning while also creating a vibrant gathering place for the broader community.

And, under Pillar Four, we are committing to a goal that will modernize our infrastructure and systems. You will see aspects of this goal come to life with the opening of Blackwell Hall, which will bring together many student-facing services into a single location – creating a true one-stop center for advising, financial aid, counseling, and other essential resources.

The full draft plan, which you will be able to access in a moment, contains a strategy layer beyond the pillars and goals. These are the measurable actions and approaches that we will prioritize.

### **A Campuswide Review**

Now, the process of finalizing our plan is not finished yet. Today marks the beginning of the last engagement phase of this plan.

Immediately following this address, the draft of the strategic plan will be shared with campus and made available through the strategic planning website. You can also scan the QR code on the screen now to view it and access the online, anonymous feedback survey.

From today through April 1, this open campus review period provides faculty, staff, and students the opportunity to give additional feedback and make suggestions. We want to hear what resonates, what could be strengthened, and where further clarity may be needed.

Following that review period, the Strategic Plan Steering Committee will reconvene in early April to carefully review all feedback and determine where additional refinements should be incorporated. And then, on May 1, we will formally release Salisbury University’s strategic plan.

At that point, the work of implementation begins, translating this

shared vision of what we will prioritize as an institution into the initiatives, partnerships, and decisions that will shape the next five years of Salisbury University. The implementation phase will be how we bring our vision to life.

Following the release of the final version of the plan, we will establish a Strategic Implementation Council to guide the next phase of the work. I am thrilled to share that Dr. Kara Raab and Dr. Chrys Egan have agreed to lead this important group – which has yet to be formed – and that they will be seeking feedback from campus shortly about what the council’s membership should look like, its charge, and how people can participate in this important work.

This group will work alongside divisions, shared governance, and Cabinet to set metrics, review plans, and ensure we are making real, visible progress. A public dashboard will be developed so that progress – and our return on investment – will be transparent and accessible to everyone.

And importantly, this work will not be static. Progress will be monitored regularly, with periodic reviews to assess what is working, where adjustments are needed, and how we continue moving the university forward.

### **A Shared Commitment to the Future**

I want to pause here and recognize something important. Strategic plans don’t just appear on paper; they are built by people. So many people have shared ideas, offered feedback, asked tough questions, and have helped shape the direction we’re discussing today.

All of you have and are helping to make this plan stronger, and that’s something I’m incredibly thankful for. Because what we’re talking about is a shared commitment to the future of this university and the students we serve.

When I look around this room, I see the people who will make these ideas real – and that’s exciting! I’m excited about the work ahead. I’m proud of the work that’s already been done. And I’m honored to be part of a community that cares this deeply about where we’re going next.

So, thank you – for your dedication, your creativity, and the passion you bring to this institution every day.

Before I close, I wanted to return to where we began today, and share a few special items connected to our Centennial celebration.

As many of you know, this milestone year has given us a chance to reflect on the incredible history of this university and the people who have shaped it. To help commemorate that history, we’ve created a Centennial book that captures many of the stories, moments, and milestones that brought us to where we are today. Proceeds from the book will go directly toward student scholarships, helping ensure that future generations of students can continue their journeys here.

A sincere thank you to the members of the Centennial Committee led by Jason Curtin, with special appreciation to Jennifer Pulsney and Dr. Creston Long of the Nabb Research Center, and to our Office of Creative Services and Brand Strategy – especially, Crystal Kelly, Ana Maldonado, and Christine Smith – for making what is truly a work of art.

I’m also happy to share that everyone here today has the opportunity to take home a keepsake – a special Centennial picture frame, created to celebrate this historic milestone in the life of our university. Just at the back of the room, we’ve set up a photo booth where you can snap a picture and sign up to receive your frame – so you can capture this moment and carry a piece of our Centennial celebration with you.

This university has always been more than buildings, programs, or plans. It’s a place where students discover who they are, where ideas take shape, where communities come together.

For generations of students, this campus has been a starting point – a place where journeys begin.

And as we look toward our collective future, that purpose remains the same: To provide a place where students can learn, grow, and build the tomorrows they imagine.

A place that welcomes them, challenges them, and prepares them for what comes next.

A place they will always be proud to call home.

Thank you.



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