Aiming Higher and Throwing Harder: The Future of Higher Education Leadership

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May 19, 2026

It is such a pleasure to be with you this morning and especially meaningful to return to the University of Hartford, a community that had a profound impact on my understanding of higher education leadership and of the enduring responsibilities colleges and universities bear to the public good. During my time here as provost, I was deeply grateful for the incredibly dedicated faculty and staff, who demonstrated the quiet moral courage that academic communities exercise every day in defending intellectual inquiry, supporting students through periods of uncertainty, and sustaining institutional mission amid changing social and economic realities.

I was also fortunate to serve alongside Walter Harrison— an extraordinary president whose leadership embodied the university's mission of being "a private university with a public purpose." Walt understood better than anyone I know that presidential leadership is not merely administrative; it is moral and civic in nature. He led with clarity of purpose, deep humanity, and an unwavering belief that higher education institutions have obligations not only to their students, but also to the broader society they serve. His example continues to remind us that institutional legitimacy is not sustained through branding campaigns, rankings, or strategic plans, but through a visible commitment to mission, democratic values, and the public good.

For today's leaders, this necessitates moving beyond reactive crisis management and transactional leadership toward a more values-centered model of institutional stewardship. And it requires the courage to challenge entrenched assumptions, resist purely market-driven definitions of success, and acknowledge the growing disconnect between institutional rhetoric and the lived experiences of students, families, faculty, and staff. It also mandates a willingness to lead collaboratively in environments where consensus is elusive and competing demands are often irreconcilable.

Successful higher education leaders, now and in the future, will need to embrace uncertainty and view it not as a threat to institutional survival, but as an opening for renewal and transformation. While the monumental pressures facing higher education can tempt leaders toward caution, defensiveness, or managerialism, what is needed instead is a compelling public vision for higher education that ensures institutional practices genuinely reflect the promises colleges and universities continue to make to society. But accomplishing this will

require leaders to push beyond their comfort zones. This critical aspect of effective leadership is something I learned from an unexpected source during my presidency at Mount Holyoke.

When I was appointed to the position in 2010, I was thrilled to be able to give back in such a significant way to an institution that had transformed my life and my career. I loved every minute of engaging with the intellectually adventurous students, talented faculty, and dedicated staff on my alma mater's stunningly beautiful campus and ensuring that the college served as an anchor institution, locally, nationally, and globally. I reveled in the public programs with speakers ranging from Rachel Maddow and Jhumpa Lahiri to America Ferrara and Anita Hill. I relished reading new faculty publications and attending student art shows, athletic competitions, and plays, or listening to their choral and orchestral performances. And I was immensely grateful to my colleagues from psychology, sociology, biology, economics, and African American studies who invited me to co-teach with them and to the students in each of my classes for all that I learned from them.

However, I confess that my favorite day as a college president was when I was invited to throw out the first pitch at Fenway Park. My life-long passion for the Boston Red Sox was well-known in both the college and extramural communities, and the invitation came when a Mount Holyoke alumna, who is married to one of the team's owners, surprised me with the honor. I got the call only a few hours before the game, and I remember frantically running around the house, looking for a baseball that wasn't a part of my prized collection of signed memorabilia to practice throwing. When we arrived at the park, I was greeted by the Sox's president and CEO Larry Lucchino, who brought me into the dugout to meet the players and waited with me at the edge of field before I was escorted to the mound. It was one of those moments of pure joy, mixed with terror—a little bit like giving birth—when you wonder, "How will I ever do this and is it even possible?" I turned to Larry and asked, "Any advice?"

His answer has stayed with me since that momentous July day in 2011. He said, "Throw it higher and harder than you think you need to." What I realize now, is that his dictum was a metaphor for academic leadership, especially for women, gender-diverse leaders, leaders of color, and first-generation leaders.

Too often, those of us from underrepresented groups are told— explicitly or implicitly—to be careful. To aim within the bounds of what is expected. To be competent but not bold. In both pitching and leadership, it is easy to underestimate your reach—to aim safely rather than ambitiously. For those approaching leadership from the margins, there is often unrelenting pressure to be careful, to

“not miss,” or to conform to narrow expectations of what leadership looks and feels like.

But leadership, real leadership, requires the opposite. To throw higher is to envision something beyond what others think possible—to lead with imagination, with hope, and with the audacity to redefine what excellence and inclusion can mean. It is about refusing to shrink our aspirations to fit within the contours of other people’s comfort. Throwing higher means setting visionary goals, advocating for transformational change, and daring to reach beyond what is comfortable. In leadership, it is about seeing yourself not as a caretaker of existing systems but as a shaper of the future—lifting others and the institution to higher ground.

Yet, it is not enough to throw higher. You also need to throw harder—to use your full strength even when the world tells you to hold back. Those of us from the margins are often socialized to soften their impact—to be diplomatic, deferential, or invisible to avoid backlash. Lucchino’s advice flips the script with the enjoinder to bring your full power to the moment. In academia, throwing harder means bringing the full force of your intellect, your integrity, and your courage to every challenge. It means speaking with conviction, making tough calls, standing firm in one’s values, and refusing to temper your strength just to appear agreeable. It is the willingness to take decisive action, even when others doubt your strength or question your right to lead.

My serendipitous coach’s guidance to throw higher and harder than “you think you need to” acknowledged something else that every marginalized leader understands: the distance between effort and recognition is not equal for everyone. There are invisible headwinds, and a pitch that appears strong to you may be judged as average or inadequate by spectators conditioned to underestimate you. The world often demands more of us—more excellence, more energy, more precision, more composure, and more grace—to land in the same strike zone of legitimacy and respect.

But there is also power in that overextension—a power that comes from building muscles of resilience and empathy, making us not only stronger but more humane leaders. Existing social structures in which systemic biases persist demand over-preparation, over-performance, and over-resilience—but they also illustrate the transformative power of showing what’s possible when you refuse to be constrained by others’ prejudices and preconceptions. When we throw higher and harder than we think we need to, we expand the horizons for everyone who follows.

And then, of course, there is the pitch itself. Throwing out the first pitch is a moment of public visibility—brief, symbolic, and watched by thousands.

Academic leadership is similar: each decision, each statement, is a visible act that represents much more than one individual. The key is to step onto the mound—own the space—and throw with intention, not fear. In this way, Lucchino's advice captures a universal truth about courageous leadership: don't hold back. It is a reminder to counteract the messages of smallness that institutions often send—to take the full space of one's authority, vision, and voice, and to lead with moral courage and moral resilience.

Moral resilience enables individuals to navigate ethically challenging situations without experiencing long-term negative effects and ultimately bolsters moral courage. The moral resilience of leaders contributes not only to their individual well-being but also influences the people they lead and their institutional cultures. Just as a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness can have a negative impact on the work environment, cultivating and exhibiting moral resilience, reflected in the capacity to "sustain, restore, or deepen one's integrity in response to moral complexity, confusion, distress, or setbacks," can bolster a positive culture.

Nurturing an environment that promotes moral resilience requires ongoing engagement in dialogue, combined with retrospective and prospective analyses of complex cases involving ethical dilemmas and professional obligations. When practiced at all levels, these exercises propel not only resilience, but trust building as well, by making transparent the core values and principles to which the leader is appealing and the integrity with which actions in response to challenges are being carried out. Reaching out to other campus leaders who are experiencing similarly high levels of stress can offer benefits. Yet, having a trusted colleague on one's own leadership team who will assist with reality testing is vital.

Truth is nonpartisan and foundational to both academic leadership and to democratic life. Jessica Riddell, the vice-chair of my board at AAC&U and a Shakespearean scholar at Bishop's University, showcases the importance for academic leaders of surrounding themselves with those who will tell them the truth. In discussing the role of the fool in Shakespeare's plays, she emphasizes that they were not simply entertainers; the fool was also crucial to the king's success. Under the guise of humor or madness, these truth-tellers held a moral and political mirror up to the king's behavior in a way that exposed hypocrisy and other weaknesses.

Through irony, satire, and exaggeration, the fool acted as the king's conscience and offered advice that prompted growth and the capacity to confront shortcomings. Riddell makes clear that all successful leaders need trusted colleagues who can question dominant narratives, challenge authority, and speak

honestly without fear of retribution. Successful presidents are skilled at creating an ascendent narrative for a variety of audiences even in the darkest of times. The fool can ensure that the narrative is one that inspires hope without lapsing into toxic positivity.

Instead of avoiding conflicts involving competing values and principles, effective academic leaders, like Shakespeare's fools, are trained to lean into them by holding opposing viewpoints in tension, while searching for the truth, even at the expense of comfort. This skill is more important than ever at a time when campus leaders are continually confronted by multiple constituencies, often imparting unconditional, non-negotiable demands calling for different, and sometimes conflicting, outcomes. Learning to engage in continuous self-reflection, and to laugh at oneself occasionally, can contribute to both resilience and mutual trust.

One approach to continuous self-reflection is offered by executive coach David Brendel, who points to the advent of "philosophical counseling" and the way these advisors guide their clients through structured conversations designed to facilitate an understanding of one's values and goals. According to Brendel, the process they utilize can be adopted without visiting a counselor if one is willing to engage in self-reflection around a series of questions. He suggests an approach called "SANE," which draws on questions posed by four Western philosophers or traditions: Socrates, Aristotle, Nietzsche, and the Existentialists. They are (Socrates): What is the most challenging question someone could ask me about my current approach? (Aristotle): What character virtues are most important to me and how will I express them? (Nietzsche): How will I direct my "will to power," manage my self-interest, and act in accordance with my chosen values? And (Existentialists): How will I take full responsibility for my choices and the outcomes to which they lead? The process of self-reflection around these philosophical issues can help position all leaders for success.

In this moment of enormity for higher education, moral courage is not optional. It means standing up—even when doing so costs something. It means protecting the right to think freely and to teach the truth in the face of intimidation. It means remembering that the purpose of higher education is not to comfort the powerful but to empower those who seek knowledge. So, when the winds of fear or expediency tell us to play it safe, keep in mind Lucchino's advice: throw higher and harder than you think you need to. Because the arc of integrity—like the arc of a good pitch—only reaches its target when we put our full selves behind it.

This level of moral courage is essential at a moment when American higher education is at an inflection point, confronting a convergence of pressures that

challenge not only its effectiveness and legitimacy, but also its fundamental mission and purpose. Public trust has dramatically declined. Confidence in the value of a college degree is eroding. And concerns about affordability, access, liberal bias and the capacity of colleges and universities to prepare students for a rapidly changing 21st-century workforce are escalating, exposing growing misalignments between what colleges promise and what students, employers, and society experience that lead them to ask, "Is higher education delivering on what it promises?"

At the same time, the proliferation of generative AI is reshaping how knowledge is created, accessed, and evaluated, raising critical questions about what counts as evidence of learning, the relevance of grades, and how to safeguard academic integrity in a world where the boundaries between human and machine cognition are increasingly blurred.

Layered onto this is a student mental health crisis in which anxiety, depression, and despair have surpassed financial considerations as the primary reason students are either dropping out of college or not attending in the first place--a factor that is contributing to falling enrollment numbers precipitated by demographic shifts and growing restrictions placed on international students seeking to study in the US. Meanwhile, between burgeoning student needs and budget constraints, faculty, who are being called upon to do more with less, are experiencing alarming rates of burnout.

Each of these challenges is unfolding against the backdrop of an unraveling partnership that has existed between higher education and the government since World War II. Escalating culture wars and the intensifying politicization of higher education have led to the weaponization of research funds and unprecedented governmental overreach into every aspect of college and university operations, infringing on academic freedom, institutional autonomy, shared governance.

In addition, recent provisions contained in the "One Big Beautiful Bill," that measure college accountability solely in terms of immediate employability and average salaries earned, place additional pressure on colleges and universities to defend liberal education, even its core aims— cultivating critical thinking, ethical reasoning, civic responsibility, and the capacity for lifelong learning— are more crucial than ever in an unpredictable, post-industrial society. These crosscurrents test whether higher education can continue to serve as a space for independent inquiry, evidence-based reasoning, and democratic deliberation.

Campus leaders are experiencing skyrocketing levels of moral distress, where they feel coerced into making unethical decisions but are convinced that they have no choice. For many, that distress is morphing into moral injury, as the

gap widens between institutional decisions and personal convictions, forcing them to continually revisit the question of how much individual injustice should be countenanced for the sake of long-term reform.

While often treated as discrete problems to be managed, taken together, these challenges point to a deeper issue, namely that the current design of higher education no longer aligns with the social, economic, and technological realities it is meant to serve. American higher education as it stands today was largely designed for an industrial economy defined by stable careers and predictable pathways. That world no longer exists. Today's economy is dynamic, AI-mediated, and marked by constant change. Careers are nonlinear, work is fragmented, and the most valuable skills are those that enable individuals to adapt, interpret, and create meaning amid uncertainty.

This is where the strengths of a liberal education are most evident. At its best, liberal education has always held a dual promise: to prepare individuals for meaningful work and to sustain the habits of mind and engagement on which democracy depends. But fulfilling that promise requires more than defending the status quo. The challenge before us is whether we will redesign liberal education to meet this moment and ensure that its aims are structured, delivered, and connected to opportunity. Rather than incremental change, these times call for an expansive and comprehensive reimagining of liberal education that more intentionally integrates learning, work, and democratic life. I want to offer a framework for that redesign, organized around six interrelated principles.

First, institutions must more clearly integrate curriculum and career pathways. Students need structured, visible connections between what they study and the opportunities available to them. This does not mean reducing education to job training but rather ensuring transparency in assignment design and promoting authentic assessment from the first to final semester, in which students are asked to demonstrate their skills, competencies, and mindsets, while reflecting on their learning experiences inside and outside of the classroom and connecting them to career goals, through portfolios. It also requires that all students have access to applied, experiential, integrative learning, grounded in the liberal arts, that translates knowledge into practice.

As we integrate curriculum and career, we need to account for the fact that students aren't only seeking employment, they are seeking meaningful work. While the latest CIRP studies out of UCLA show that 87.9 percent of students (an all-time high) say their primary reason for attending college is to get a good job, over 95 percent of students say they want more than a job; they want careers that align with a sense of purpose. Though increasingly marginalized from the

mainstream curriculum, fostering lives of meaning and purpose is foundational to a liberal education designed to nurture the skills and dispositions that lead to human flourishing for the sake of both the learner and the community. By embracing and reaffirming this as central to liberal education's mission, perhaps colleges and universities can reactivate our own sense of purpose and begin to restore public trust in the enduring and transformative power of American higher education—not merely as a means for getting a good job but as a catalyst for living a good life, even in the absence of a good society. Of course, this in turn necessitates reenvisioning reward structures that privilege publications and research over teaching excellence, service, and mentorship that we know makes a difference to the long-term success of students, even decades after graduation.

Second, AI literacy must be embedded across all disciplines. As generative AI reshapes knowledge production and work, students need more than technical familiarity; they must understand how to critically and ethically engage with these tools within their fields. At the same time, the distinctively human capacities cultivated through liberal education—judgment, interpretation, creativity, and moral reasoning—become even more essential. AI literacy isn't just about knowing how to ask the right prompts, it includes understanding how AI systems are trained, recognizing bias and limitations, and evaluating outputs critically. Students need to ask not just, "How do I use this?" but "Should I trust this?" Ultimately, AI literacy is about student agency.

Because AI is not a discrete discipline and is instead a foundational layer shaping all fields, AI literacy must become a core expectation, not an elective enhancement. According to AAC&U's latest research on employers and AI, 99 percent of employers say they expect all their employees to be proficient in AI over the next five years, and yet 95 percent of faculty report they are not, themselves, proficient. Therefore, institutions must invest in faculty development to close the growing gap between employer expectations and instructional capacity.

Third, institutions must recenter humanistic inquiry and moral imagination—imaging what it is like to be in the shoes of another, different from oneself. Moral imagination entails the essential capacity to empathize with and understand the perspectives of others, preventing dehumanization. In these days of growing polarization and partisanship, higher education has a vital role to play in helping students grapple with complexity, difference, and ethical ambiguity. Rather than ancillary, this dimension of learning, which includes developing critical listening skills and mindsets of intellectual humility, is foundational to effective leadership, democratic participation, and workforce preparation. The foregrounding of moral imagination and humanistic identification in liberal education helps explain finding from Tony Carnevale's research from when he was

at the Georgetown Center for Education and the Workforce revealing that those who have had a liberal education are seven times less likely to exhibit authoritarian preferences precisely because liberal education fosters critical thinking, openness to diverse perspectives, and psychological security when confronted with disagreement, reducing the appeal of rigid, "one-answer" worldviews. The study concludes that liberal education is a "cornerstone of successful democracies" and acts as a "bulwark against authoritarianism."

Fourth, colleges and universities must enact pedagogies of kindness and care grounded in trust, transparency, and belonging. Liberal education for the future will require institutions to rethink how they teach. For far too long, colleges and universities have adhered to models of ranking and sorting in which excellence was measured by asking students to respond to questions on standardized tests for which we already know the answers, instead of asking them to wrestle with the grand challenges and wicked problems confronting our societies, locally and globally.

Students today are navigating extraordinary levels of uncertainty, stress, and complexity. And yet, our pedagogies remain rooted in frameworks of exclusion and endurance, despite the distinctiveness of this moment, which calls for a transition to pedagogies of kindness—approaches that center trust, transparency, and care. Contrary to the dominant narrative, kindness is not antithetical academic excellence, it is a condition for it. If we want students to be intellectually adventurous, to engage deeply, and to persist through challenges, we must create environments in which they feel supported in doing so.

AAC&U senior fellow Cia Verschelden's compelling scholarship on cognitive bandwith highlights the ways in which racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism and other forms of discrimination, along with food and shelter insecurity, reduce the capacity of students to learn both inside and outside of the classroom. She points out that the biggest bandwith stealer is none other than belonging uncertainty and encourages teaching practices that can restore cognitive bandwith and foster a sense of welcome and belonging in each of our students.

There is a growing body of literature focused on this approach, including Kevin McClure's *The Caring University* and JT Torres's *Teaching, Learning, and Caring in Higher Education*. I want to highlight two of my favorite scholars engaged in promoting pedagogies of kindness and care—Cate Denial and Mays Imad. Denial, who is a history professor at Knox College, makes the case for challenging the status quo by applying compassion to every situation and finding a space for all students to do their best work by making the classroom accessible to everyone. For her, kindness is linked to justice, requiring professors to consider

students' complex lives, identities, and challenges. This takes the form of collaborating with students around the ways the syllabi, assignments, and assessment are designed, as well as the life experiences that should be respected in the classroom. Her commitment to "believing students and believing in students" goes a long way toward upending the transactional model of education and promoting models of transformation at the core of AAC&U's work.

Professor Imad, a neurobiologist at Connecticut College, also calls for a radically different approach to delivering a liberal education—one that destabilizes the competitive structures failing students and faculty. Imad, who studies trauma-informed pedagogy and looks at the physiological and psychological impacts of trauma on student learning, uses her findings on the neurobiology of learning to address how institutions can meet their educational missions at a time when so many of their students and employees are experiencing chronic stress and burnout.

Pushing back against current expectations that students should prioritize purely intellectual pursuits like research and leave the rest of the world behind, she argues that "we must cultivate healthy and meaningful relationships between the learner, knowledge, self, peers, professors, and communities by highlighting how what we are studying connects to the world beyond the classroom." She wants her students to experience a pedagogy of wholeness and interconnectedness that allows them to uncover deeper truths about their inner selves, fellow human beings and the world, noting that her students want more out of their education than courses packed with content, frequently devoid of personal connections and the creative and collaborative problem-solving of real-world challenges. For her, the crucial question is this: "Do I have an ethical responsibility to truly listen and accommodate students' suggestions and expectations, or should I adhere to a curriculum increasingly influenced by industry demands and expectations?"

What this type of departure from past norms necessitates leads to a fifth recommendation, namely that institutions must move beyond cultivating individual resilience within broken systems to systems-level reform. Jessica Riddell, who I mentioned earlier, does work on institutional transformation centered on creating "hope circuits." She begins by pointing to the fact that many of the structures that exhaust students, faculty, and communities are broken and yet are functioning exactly as they were designed. Drawing on work of psychologists focused on rewiring the brain and the metaphor of electrical circuits being rewired to operate better once complex systems are understood, she asks, "How do we design hopeful and resilient systems for ourselves and rewire our mindsets from scarcity to abundance and from crisis to flourishing?"

Building hope circuits entails embarking on a systems-level reimagining of the university in ways that invest strategically in models that expand opportunity, embrace experimentation and risk-taking, and treat failure as a vital component of learning and innovation. Doing so requires an understanding that persistent scarcity mindset narrows imagination and reinforces zero-sum approaches to change. Abundance is not about having more, but about seeing and using what we have more effectively.

Hope, in this sense, is a precursor for meaningful, equitable, and future-oriented liberal education. In the end, she argues for engaging in social movement building that unites us through shared purpose and a commitment to unlearning and relearning. Riddell suggests that this begins with slowing down to surface the assumptions embedded in our institutions, engaging in divergent thinking, living in the question, staying with complexity, and reframing discomfort as an essential feature of growth rather than a flaw to be eliminated. Crisis, in this view, is not an aberration but a condition that can catalyze creativity and transformation.

Finally, in a deindustrialized society marked by economic dislocation and widening inequities, the future of liberal education depends on colleges and universities embracing their role as anchor institutions—deeply embedded in, and accountable to, the communities they serve. Institutional success can no longer be measured solely by enrollment, completion rates, or rankings; it is inextricably linked to the psychological, social, educational, economic, and physical well-being of surrounding communities. When communities struggle, institutions cannot truly thrive. The vitality of one is bound to the flourishing of the other.

This shift requires a fundamental reorientation of purpose. As Hunter College president, Nancy Cantor, has argued, the academy must get past asserting its expertise—telling communities what it is good at—and instead engage in the more generative, and often more difficult, work of asking what it is good for. This means listening carefully to community-defined needs and aspirations, and co-creating solutions that are responsive, reciprocal, and sustained. It requires humility, a willingness to share authority, and recognition that knowledge is distributed across communities, not held exclusively within academic walls.

In practice, this anchor mission calls for institutions to integrate teaching, research, and service in ways that directly contribute to community well-being. Liberal education, with its emphasis on critical inquiry, ethical reasoning, and civic engagement, is uniquely positioned to support this work. Students can become active participants in addressing real-world challenges—partnering with local organizations, contributing to public problem-solving, and developing the capacities needed for democratic life. Faculty scholarship can be oriented toward

public impact, informed by and accountable to community contexts. Institutional resources— physical, intellectual, and economic—can be leveraged to support local development, from workforce pathways to public health initiatives.

Equally important is the recognition that well-being is multidimensional. Educational opportunity cannot be disentangled from issues such as mental health, housing stability, environmental conditions, and economic security. Anchor institutions must therefore work across sectors, building partnerships with schools, healthcare providers, businesses, and civic organizations to address these interconnected challenges. In doing so, they help to construct ecosystems of support that enable individuals and communities not only to persist, but to flourish.

This approach also reframes the relationship between liberal education and workforce development. Rather than positioning them as competing priorities, anchor institutions can align them through pathways that are both economically meaningful and broadly educative—preparing individuals for work, citizenship, and lifelong learning. By grounding these efforts in the lived realities of their communities, institutions can ensure that educational programs are not abstract or disconnected, but relevant, accessible, and transformative.

Ultimately, to serve as true anchors is to recognize that higher education is a public good, with obligations that extend beyond campus boundaries. It is to commit to a model of mutual flourishing, where the success of the institution is measured by the extent to which it contributes to the well-being and possibility of the communities it calls home.

Across all six principles, equity must function as a core design requirement. Without intentional attention, new models—particularly those involving technology and experiential learning—risk reproducing or exacerbating existing disparities. The students most affected by economic and technological disruption are often those historically underserved by higher education. Ensuring that all students have access to high-impact learning and clear pathways to opportunity is essential to both institutional mission and public legitimacy.

So where does this leave us? For institutional leaders, this framework suggests several priorities: redesigning general education to emphasize integration and application; embedding AI and digital fluency across the curriculum; incentivizing faculty innovation in teaching and program design; strengthening partnerships beyond the campus; and aligning mission, resource allocation, and student outcomes more deliberately. These are not modest adjustments, but neither are they unattainable. Many institutions are already experimenting with elements of this approach. The challenge is to move from isolated innovation to coherent redesign.

At AAC&U, we believe deeply in the power of liberal education. But belief alone is insufficient. This is a moment for action. We are not simply redesigning curricula; we are redefining the relationship between education and opportunity. The question before us is not whether higher education will change—it already is. The question is whether we will shape that change with intention or be shaped by forces beyond our control. At its core, liberal education is not simply about preparing students for the world as it is. It is about equipping them to imagine—and create—the world as it could be. That mission has never been more necessary. And the responsibility to realize it has never been more urgent.

Thank you.