

Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to this special University of Akron event, and thank you for attending our 2025 State of the University address, hosted by the Akron Press Club. Last year, I shared with the community a theme of listening and the results of my months-long listening tour. At that time, I was learning everything I could about the University to report back my findings. Upon giving last year's speech, I'd been in the job just 112 days, and my remarks were based on numbers. We quantified numeric accomplishments, relayed dates and discussed institutional statistics.

Now, more than 400 days after the first time we met in this context, I am thrilled to shift the focus from quantifying our strengths and challenges, to reflecting on our heart and culture. While I'm excited to share with you my perspectives on, and aspirations for, the incredible University of Akron, I'm more enthusiastic about our warranted spirit of celebration. What are we celebrating? Why the momentum? Since the last time we met here at Quaker Station, The University of Akron has grown. I do have one important number for you here at the outset—9.7. A 9.7% increase--that's how many more first-time, first-year students we have compared to last fall. This is the highest growth number in the state for that student population. We are growing at the undergraduate and graduate levels, as a destination for transfer students, and across our main and Wayne campuses. Our census number has grown, but we have also renewed energy in our unique identity. We're being authentically Akron.

YES, we are celebrating Zips wins in spite of our challenges. On August 25th, our first day of classes, we declared a year of celebration. After all, there is much to celebrate about this place and its people. Today, I invite you, the Akron community and beyond, to join the celebration. I invite you to consider the power of the word YES.

During the past 400-plus days, as I thought about the themes that define UA's identity and the state of the University, my mind kept returning to the words, "refresh" and "renew." Today, I will talk about The University of Akron as a resilient institution that has overcome objective struggles. In overcoming some of those, we realize there is still considerable work to do. I will share with you our refreshed brand. I do not speak about brand in terms of marketing efforts alone, however. Rather, I speak about the holistic concept of UA's brand—a complete picture of who we are. It encompasses our identity and renewed culture. It is the UA that everyone who interacts with us will see reflected in our place and our people. I invite you to journey alongside me as we discuss who we are, our collective vision for the future and the implications of why community is at our core.

As a public institution, The University of Akron is not only a community within a community, but we are also a grateful partner with our state. We want to help lead the way in Ohio and beyond. To that end, I'd like to thank Governor Mike DeWine, Chancellor Mike Duffey, and the Ohio General Assembly for their support of higher education in the state operating budget, including the increase to State Share of Instruction which helps keep tuition affordable.

On the local level, thank you to the City of Akron under the leadership of Mayor Shammass Malik, and to Summit County, County Executive Ilene Shapiro, and the Greater Akron Chamber under the leadership of Steve Millard. And, of course, I'd like to thank the UA Board of Trustees for their service and dedication to The University of Akron. Many of them are here today. Thank you for attending. These continued partnerships are helping propel UA forward. By driving economic development and growth in the region, these entities and people have opened up exceptional opportunities for The University of Akron to thrive.

We realize that our success does not take place in a vacuum. Thanks to the generous support of the Knight Foundation and many others, we are excited participants in the Main Street development project. With extensive renovations planned for the Polsky building, we are thrilled to share that piece of Akron history with the rest of the community. The University has also benefited from downtown beautification projects. With both Main Street and Lock 3 Park inviting more people to enjoy the city, the University flourishes.

Our UA distinctiveness is fundamentally tied to the storied identity of this community. We are proudly its intellectual center, and we felt it was important to better showcase that to the world. As we thought about how we could shape both external and internal perceptions of the UA brand, a year ago, we partnered with an internationally acclaimed firm.

This partnership led to an extensive discovery process, a survey with more than 600 respondents, 14 focus groups, and a deep dive into our history. I'd like to share with you a profoundly simple statement a current student made: "At The University of Akron, you have the opportunity to be someone." We want that to be the case for all of our 15,000-plus students. And, as we grow, the sky is the limit. It is our responsibility to help our students identify and understand their own importance, professionally and personally. We are the home to incredibly strong programs across diverse disciplines. We offer our students big opportunities in an environment scalable to their individual comfort level. With that knowledge, we embarked on a creative journey and learned: In a world that needs more "yes," The University of Akron is providing it, so we thought we should start there.

[University of Akron video]

The power of those three letters cannot be overstated. Each component of the University contributes to our identity. Last year, I gave numbers as evidence of our efficacy. Today, I will highlight some collective points of pride and ask you, our community partners, to help us celebrate them. Recently, at our internal State of the University address, I asked our faculty, staff and leadership to participate in a discovery process of their own. My call-to-action was simple: set out to discover the differentiators that add value to our UA programs, apply those to our capacity to say "YES," and consider the deeper social impact of our growth.

Enumerating all the YES opportunities we provide to students would be an impossible task. There are countless stories of individual success. We know this, not *just* because we are the educational home to amazing students and alumni, and not *just* because the rankings tell us so. We know it, because the University, as an educational institution, is making our entire community stronger. We're internationally revered for strong academic programs. We're consistently ranked in Ohio, in the Midwest, in the nation, for top academic offerings. And it doesn't stop when our students leave the four-walled confines of our classrooms. Last season alone, our athletics teams won six conference championships—five in the MAC and one in the Big East. We live our identity, and we see the outcomes proven time and again by our current students and alumni.

We are a national research leader with world-renowned faculty and patent producers. Steps from our campus is the Bounce Innovation Hub, Akron's headquarters for entrepreneurs, startups and small businesses. There, University students and alumni turn their dreams into reality and provide our community with transformative products and services.

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

Talking solely about ROI, however, largely misses the heart of who we are as an institution.

Akron is a leader in access...access to educational programs and unique opportunities built into our identity. We understand that the surrounding community—all of you in this room—rely on us. A stronger University of Akron translates to a stronger Akron community. In recognition of that, we are a frontrunner in workforce development—for healthcare, industry, law, business, education and so much more.

With early access to internships, co-ops, practical experience and community engagement, our students start and finish their college education in expanded classrooms that transcend the perimeter of our campus. And our affordable access extends to a variety of prospective students, with smart scholarships, realistic housing costs, opportunities to both commute and maintain involvement, and to do something no one else in an entire student's family has ever done—obtain a higher education. Our first-generation college student programs are second-to-none.

Through the discovery process I mentioned earlier, we heard time and again that our students are ambitious go-getters who appreciate the personalized attention our faculty and staff tailor to support their individual educational goals. A recent alumnus took some time to share with us about his Akron experience and the meaning of an Akron YES.

[University of Akron video]

What a fantastic testimony to the power of affirmation.

Our urban campus is another identifying feature to be embraced. It increases our access to a variety of opportunities and exposes students to the social realities their academic programs can equip them to repair. At The University of Akron, we have the responsibility to reframe the misguided perceptions that incorrectly identify our location as a negative. We seek your support in helping to spread that message. It is time that the public perception honestly aligns with our true identity.

We are an integral part of a community that needs us and simultaneously feeds us. In large part, *because of our location*, our students are given the opportunity to be catalysts for change. They drive those changes, pragmatically, to the benefit of our contemporary society. Thank you for the role that you and your organizations play in helping us provide more YES. Together, let's commit to a revitalized University of Akron built around identity, authenticity, history and collective culture. Those values are at the core of the Akron brand, and it is on us to live that in every interaction.

Our enrollment this fall is a testament to the shifting public perception. To the Akron community, I want to clearly, on record, say: the state of the university is strong. We're in celebration mode, but that will

not lead to stagnancy or complacency. While our confidence and esteem have been shaken, we must now evolve as a primary economic, intellectual and cultural contributor. Our resilience has been objectively tested. But...we've emerged from struggles into an era of comprehensive growth.

Three weeks ago, when I spoke internally at the University, I highlighted some goals for our future. In short, I told my colleagues and students who were present: we must use our self-reflection process in the immediate short- and long-term to *discover possibility*. We will no longer allow our institutional identity crisis to continue. The pertinent question for UA is not, "Who are we?" Instead, it is, "Knowing our value and social impact, where can we go?" Or, more fitting, "Where *can't* we go?"

Today, I'd like to share with you the highlights of my internal State of the University address. As we think about comprehensive growth, I'd like to outline for the Akron community five key areas: enrollment, finances, reputation, personal development and campus beautification.

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

I have challenged campus leadership to build consistency and strategy around recruiting, student retention, building out of unique student opportunities, and enhancing "customer service." I have requested clear alignment in the areas of admissions, enrollment management and brand management, to identify our target audiences and high-priority geographic locations. The landscape is verdant for purposeful and fruitful enrollment campaigns. We are already deeply involved in recruiting initiatives in numerous areas. However, we are going to double-down on our efforts outside of our immediate six-county region, enhance engagement with Akron Public Schools and other nearby "feeder" districts, and create accessibility routes for transfer students to continue the momentum of the past two years. Akron is a destination. Akron is a vibe. The University commits to our multi-faceted role in attracting talent and potential to this wonderful area.

As you probably know, the great majority of our students hail from counties immediately adjacent to the University. Now is the time to extend our reach and showcase the institution as an affordable and viable option unbounded by geography. Units across campus will continue to collaborate on recruitment and retention strategies that are parallel to our revitalization plan. As we did last year, we will continue to push to lead the regional timelines for student admissions, program acceptance and financial aid notifications. There is power in YES, and we want students to know, early on in the college search process, that The University of Akron is giving the world—giving them—more of it.

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

Proportional to campus population growth is our net tuition revenue, which is the primary driver of institutional income. In addition to revenues from tuition, we are financially dependent on earning the confidence of our donors and continuing to cultivate the institution's advancement. We will demonstrate that we are a reliable, strong investment for large, transformational initiatives. I've already mentioned the Polsky project, made possible through the generosity of the Knight Foundation and other donors. After receiving support from the State of Ohio's capital budget which is critical to maintaining our infrastructure, we're in the middle of a massive concrete and brick project to create a new Buchtel Commons walkway. We're strategically reshaping what it means for students to reside at the UA campus, commute to class or simply visit. In collaboration with larger statewide endeavors to reduce the

footprints of the state institutions, the University has found ways to sell properties and reduce maintenance costs of buildings that no longer fit our needs.

We thank Governor DeWine, the Ohio legislature and Chancellor Duffey for the Square Footage Reduction Revolving Loan Fund, helping campuses, like UA, with spatial right-sizing. As part of our revitalization plan, we are already several months into a budget improvement plan that simultaneously reduces UA's debt burden and raises investor trust. Through this year and the subsequent two fiscal years, the university's reliance on reserves will be dramatically lessened, allowing us to maximize resource stewardship and accountability.

The third growth area is **reputational**.

Now is the time to capitalize upon everything it means to be part of this Akron community. A refreshed brand and identity perspective is key to sparking a renewed organizational culture. Not only do we want to increase the notoriety of our academic offerings throughout the region, but we also want to spread the good word in national and international markets. YES—there's that word again—YES, there is a component of brand that speaks to our marketing efforts. But the concept is so much deeper.

As we improve the student life and build out student opportunities, we will continue to create partnerships, and interact with new stakeholders, to amplify the 360-degree educational experience. Within our budget improvement plan, we have committed to aligning athletic spending in a strategic way to continue the support of team and individual champions while reducing the stress on the bottom line. Part of our UA brand—part of our capacity to say YES—depends on our collective ability to harmoniously connect our unique Akron opportunities in ways that unite the institution's distinct components.

Through owned and social media, we will amplify our differentiators and exceptional programs by meeting students, families, educational partners and the greater community on their preferred platforms. As I mentioned previously, it is essential to develop a consistent, across-the-board endeavor to reframe, reshape and expand positive qualitative perceptions of The University of Akron.

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

To maximize student success, we must invest in the professional growth and in the careers of our people. development is certainly a high-priority aspiration. So is colleague growth. By creating YES opportunities for our personnel, we can strengthen job satisfaction and retain the top talent that edifies the campus and uplifts the community. Career growth and development is necessary to the health of the University, and this commitment will shape our culture for generations to come.

As the University's president, it is important for me to stimulate a positive environment that will foster a collective attitude open to transformation, institutional change and steady growth. Colleague agency to develop professionally will propel UA into a collective sense of institutional pride and individual validation. We will support our colleagues as a way of fortifying our student-centered mission.

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

The pride we take in keeping our campus operable and beautiful is a direct reflection of our desire to thrive. For The University of Akron, thriving is going to be so "on-brand." As you know, we have

incredible, and in many ways, unique infrastructure. Campus walkways and buildings boast some of the highest foot traffic in the city. We will use our facility upgrades to elevate our entire community.

The University of Akron is once again ranked number one in the world for polymer science and plastics engineering, a fitting tribute to an educational institution that is a key member of our area's Polymer Industry Cluster. This initiative brings together higher education, economic development partners, and business and industry, to create a world-class polymer center right here in Akron. With the help of our Ohio elected officials, at both the federal and state levels, the Polymer Industry Cluster received one hundred million dollars just last year. The Cluster will build a Polymer Innovation Pilot Facility immediately adjacent to campus. This project allows researchers, start-up businesses and companies to make testable quantities of new materials for the development of commercial products.

The University's role in increasing the research, development and production of polymer technologies cannot be overstated. Together, with all of you, our community partners, we will witness this facility embody the centrality of polymers, improve the campus and propel the community and beyond. We are grateful to the state of Ohio for making Akron the site of one of just four innovation hubs.

Polymer science and polymer engineering is an internationally renowned part of The University of Akron fabric. But it's just one of many, many aspects that makes UA an incredible institution. That's why comprehensive growth is key. The University is providing opportunity for all to thrive—in a diversity of thought, a wealth of programs, and for the foreseeable future.

At The University of Akron, we've begun our 156th year. At the beginning of my address, I promised to relay the community-wide implications of the University's success. It is really a simple concept. Every YES the University creates for a prospective student or colleague is a YES for our community at-large. Since my presidency began in May of 2024, I have discussed with the campus and our surrounding partners my aspirations toward changing the narrative. Throughout my speech, I've mentioned the brand discovery method numerous times. I'd like to share with you one last soundbite from that process. When describing The University of Akron, a student confidently stated, "Here, no one has to do it alone."

I extend that message to the greater community. We are in this together. That means the discovery process, the strategy, the vision, the creation of opportunities...and in our collective capacity to give the world more YES. That affirmation must remain at the heart of everything we do. While the University faces a variety of challenges and an uphill battle to grow in spite of social realities, each challenge is met with an equally great or more powerful opportunity. As I consider what it means to be part of the Akron community and lead the institution at its intellectual center, I can think of no word more powerful or positive than a simple YES. Go Zips!