

Remarks by Chancellor Kent Syverud

Delivered on January 24, 2022

Location: Virtual

Remarks: Winter Message to the University Community

*The Chancellor shared his 2022 Winter Message to the University community in a virtual message. Below is the text of his remarks.*

Welcome to the spring semester of 2022. For the second year in a row, our tradition of gathering in person for this January message must adapt to changing circumstances. That’s something the Orange community has become pretty good at over the last two years.

We all are weary of this pandemic. And yet through it all, the Orange spirit of our people has kept us moving forward and making progress.

Last year in this very message, I talked about your Orange qualities of grit and grace and greatness in the face of the pandemic. In the year since, you have exceeded all expectations. You have shown how a great university responds to adversity. You have proved that, whatever the adversity, Syracuse University will persevere and, whatever the opportunity, Syracuse University will succeed.

I am grateful to our students for following public health guidance, for working hard and contributing to the vibrant campus life that makes Syracuse distinctive. Thank you for valuing our togetherness.

I am grateful to our faculty, whose unbounded creativity and dedication to our students has continued to build the University’s global reputation. You have persevered for our students in meaningful and important ways while living with your own pandemic-related challenges.

And I am grateful to our staff who support our students. You help our students succeed academically and personally in countless ways, from advising to mental health and wellness. You show up for our students and faculty and for your colleagues, finding solutions to challenges we couldn’t have imagined two years ago.

This past fall, campus life was back to nearly normal, and it felt great. We welcomed alumni back for Coming Back Together and Orange Central. We hosted more than 120 events in the stadium, including New Student Convocation, Football Fan Fest, and reunion events including the Class of 2020 Commencement. We had fans back in full for football and basketball games and all athletics. We sent more than 500 students from Syracuse and university partners to study abroad, and we brought them home safely.

Syracuse University has also persevered on behalf of our broader community. When the omicron variant surge overwhelmed testing locations, we opened our testing center to the public. No appointment, no wait, no charge for the thousands of community members who came in to be tested. We are the only private university in New York State that did this. With community partners, we launched Operation Orange Warm Up, collecting hundreds of winter coats and other gear to help our residents endure the cold. We’re furthering our commitment to economic inclusion through the Building Local initiative. We’re expanding hiring in our Central New York community, particularly in neighborhoods that need jobs. We are broadening our efforts to purchase goods and services from local and minority-owned businesses.

This fall we hosted an amazing series of events and programs including the dedication of the National Veterans Resource Center and the endowment of the Institute for Veterans and Military Families. At that time, we put a stake in the ground. We don’t just want to be the best private university for veterans. We want to be the best university anywhere for veterans.

Achieving this ambition requires perseverance from all of us across the University. There have been some spectacular successes recently. One example is in the College of Law. Syracuse University College of Law is among the top four in the nation with the highest number of students accepted into the Army Judge Advocates General, or JAG, Active Duty program for 2022. This is historically an outstanding career path to becoming a trial lawyer, a prosecutor or a public defender in the United States.

Despite the pandemic impacting every aspect of our operations, we persevered and succeeded this past semester, but each semester has presented different challenges. We’ve had to keep the health and well-being of our campus and community at the heart of every decision we make.

We were one of the first universities to require vaccines and booster shots. We have made difficult decisions that have ultimately proven to be the right decisions. We have used our strengths as a world-class research university, tapping faculty expertise to pilot public health programs. Syracuse University’s innovative wastewater surveillance testing model was adopted by New York State and expanded to all 62 counties and to other cities around the country. We will continue to persevere and succeed by putting science first and being flexible and patient as COVID-19 evolves from a pandemic to an endemic illness.

Our alumni and donors have also persevered and succeeded with us in our commitment to Syracuse University. The Forever Orange Campaign passed the $1 billion mark last summer. And in the last six months, our University raised more in cash to support our mission than in any 12 months in our entire history. To our donors and alumni: your perseverance has led to our success so far. I thank each one of you. Now it is time for our campaign to pivot even further to support our University’s highest priorities in the coming years: academic excellence and being a university welcoming to all. Great universities change lives by preparing the next generation of experts, leaders, dreamers and doers. And great universities are the source of world-changing discoveries and highly innovative solutions.

The first two thirds of our Forever Orange campaign focused on our students. We have concentrated on the experiences, resources, the financial aid that enable them to persevere and succeed. We have raised more than $176 million for undergraduate and graduate scholarships and financial aid.

And Forever Orange has also created and expanded mentoring programs and unique learning opportunities. The Kessler Scholars Program makes Syracuse part of a consortium that seeks to transform the first-generation student experience through scholarships, peer mentorship, career enrichment, community projects and study abroad. In the Whitman School of Management, the Goodman IMPRESS program is being expanded. This initiative helps business students enhance personal and professional skills, with tangible results.

When given opportunities like this, our students persevere and succeed through all challenges, driving academic excellence.

For example, Matt Cufari, a junior physics and computer science major, is investigating the dynamics of tidal disruption events with physics professor Eric Coughlin. He is first author on a paper, “The Eccentric Nature of Eccentric Tidal Disruption Events.” It was published by the Astrophysical Journal in October 2021. He will present this work at the American Astronomical Society meeting in March. Matt will represent our University well.

And then there is Julia Chou, a senior architecture major, who completed an internship with the architecture firm HKS last summer. She is also the lead graphic designer for the Women’s Network, a women-led national networking organization focused on empowering and connecting collegiate women and celebrating their ambition. During her time at Syracuse, she created a podcast to discuss design and disability justice and is focusing on disability and equity in her thesis. Julia is a Remembrance Scholar and member of the Renée Crown University Honors Program.

Today, I am asking us to pivot toward another vital driver of academic excellence at Syracuse University, our faculty. Here in the home stretch of the Forever Orange campaign, we’re turning the focus toward building the resources our faculty need to succeed. We will be working to raise funds that jumpstart new faculty research and provide seed funding for promising ideas. We will also be building the resources we need to attract and retain faculty in a highly competitive world.

That’s why I am announcing today that we are launching the Forever Orange Faculty Excellence Program. This initiative will provide incentives for donors and alumni to create endowments for professorships, chairs and faculty support funds. These resources are crucial to our ability to recruit and retain accomplished and diverse faculty. Doing this right will assure that Syracuse University’s academic mission will persevere and succeed for generations ahead.

Here’s one example of how endowments help put Syracuse on the national stage. An endowed professorship helped the University recruit Tripti Bhattacharya, the Thonis Family Professor of Earth and Environmental Sciences. Her work uses environmental evidence to understand the effect of global climate change on future rainfall. This is a major factor in disasters that have plagued the western United States and areas around the globe. Not only has Professor Bhattacharya published in top scientific journals, but she is also one of just eight leading climate scholars recruited by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine to make recommendations that will help shape future funding through the National Science Foundation.

Across our schools and colleges, faculty are working to secure more research funding. We are making good progress. In the last six months, our faculty have received more highly competitive awards from the National Science Foundation than the entire previous year, totaling just over $13.1 million. Two of these are prestigious NSF CAREER grants. Congratulations to Davoud Mozhdehi and John Franck on these highly selective awards.

This is research that makes a difference. Katherine McDonald, associate dean of research and professor of public health in Falk College is co-leading a project to develop research ethics training that is accessible to adults with cognitive disabilities. In the spirit of “nothing about us without us,” the researchers will provide the online training free to research organizations. They are removing barriers to participation to ensure people with cognitive disabilities are represented.

And then there is Scott Manning Stevens, a professor in the English department and director of Native American Studies. He leads the multi-disciplinary team that received a Mellon Foundation grant. This prestigious award will build further excellence in global Indigenous studies and environmental justice at Syracuse. The project will create opportunities for researchers and students to collaborate across geographies, disciplines and methods of inquiry.

These outstanding faculty are moving us in the right direction.

To persevere and succeed in our pursuit of academic excellence, we need to aim higher with tough choices in our new academic investments. That’s why our Provost, Gretchen Ritter, is leading a refresh of our Academic Strategic Plan. Provost Ritter has only been here a few months, but she has already toured many corners of campus, met with faculty and learned a great deal about what makes Syracuse distinctive. She has initiated a comprehensive review of University research. She has asked a task force to review and assess our research clusters and hiring. She has put key people in place on our team to drive the future of the academic enterprise.

Another aspect of building academic excellence and reputation is to consider how Syracuse University will grow our presence in Washington, D.C. Vice Chancellor Mike Haynie, working with Provost Ritter and other leaders, is developing a coordinated strategic plan. The vision is that—as One University—we will build on our strengths in citizenship and public affairs, journalism, veterans and military families, and in alumni connections and other areas. Our faculty and alumni are already engaged here. Our students want to learn and work in the nation’s capital. And, at the same time, we want to strengthen and expand the University’s ties with key policy makers and thought leaders.

Academic excellence also requires technologies and facilities that support our aspirations. On the technology front, the iSchool’s Jeff Rubin is advising me on technology strategy for the University. He is coordinating with stakeholders and evaluating opportunities as we determine our technology priorities.

As we expand Syracuse University Global and the College of Professional Studies, technology is the key to reaching students who would otherwise be unable to complete a Syracuse degree. It enables us to deliver the highest-quality educational experiences to learners around the world. Here on campus, technology supports great teaching and learning. It is also critical that our technology supports the research being done today and is ready to enable the discoveries of tomorrow.

To ensure our facilities contribute to academic excellence, we are refreshing the Campus Framework in tandem with the Academic Strategic Plan. Established seven years ago, the intent of the framework was to guide our decisions about facilities in a way consistent with our priorities and aspirations.

The Campus Framework has been remarkably effective. The stadium renovation has transformed both our skyline and the fan experience. The Syracuse University campus is more beautiful than ever. We’re enhancing holistic health and wellness in the Barnes Center. Our student organizations are anchored in the heart of campus at the Schine Student Center. We have upgraded academic facilities across campus to enhance technology and accessibility, including in the iconic Hall of Languages. We have already begun planning projects such as upgrades to Link Hall and the Center for Science and Technology to make spaces more functional for student recruitment, collaboration and faculty research.

But we aren’t finished with the Framework. This is the right time to take a close look at our next set of Campus Framework priorities. I have appointed a working group to oversee the refresh. Their charge is to produce a recommendation for an addendum to the Campus Framework this spring. This group includes Steve Bennett, Julia Czerniak, Cerri Banks, Michael Speaks, Steven Einhorn, Pete Sala, Kris Klinger and Allen Groves. They will work with campus stakeholders to focus on lessons learned. I have asked them to evaluate the Campus Framework, and how we should revise it to reflect our current needs in academics, housing and the student experience.

In my view, academic excellence cannot exist without an equal, strong commitment to being a university welcoming to all—a place that leads in the areas of diversity, equity, inclusion and access.

In September, we opened 119 Euclid Ave., a new space for students to gather and honor the University’s Black community and experiences. This beautifully renovated space is the product of engagement by students, faculty, staff and alumni whose input shaped its look and feel.

This past fall, we also published a draft of the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility strategic plan and asked our community for input. When the comment period closed in early December, we’d received feedback from more than 850 individuals and 60 groups of students, faculty, alumni and staff across the University. Their feedback will help as we move to implementation of the plan. I am grateful to the interim team of Diane Murphy, Shiu-Kai Chin and Cerri Banks for their continued work on making progress with our strategic plan. This team is coordinating the analysis of the data collected as we prepare to welcome new leadership.

And, yes, we’re looking for an amazing leader in our next vice president for diversity and inclusion. This national search seeks a committed and courageous individual. We must identify a leader who will help us achieve our goal of being a university that is welcoming to all.

Our Orange community has already persevered and succeeded through so much together these last two years. Much work remains ahead of us. As we begin the Spring 2022 semester, let’s continue our spirit of grit and grace as we emerge from the pandemic. I know we can do this. I know this because we have the best, brightest, and most talented people here. I know this because we’ve proven it time after time.

Let’s continue to focus on those qualities that have defined Syracuse University’s past and will guide its future at our best. Our perseverance. Our curiosity. Our empathy. Our kindness. Our drive to reach beyond the status quo. That’s the best of the Orange spirit. Because of you, Syracuse University will persevere and will succeed. Thank you, and Go Orange!