

Our Legacy. Our Promise

Inaugural Address

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Chancellor White, Trustees Farar, Norton, Stepanek, Reyes-Salinas, and White, Mayor Liccardo, Supervisor Chavez, distinguished clergy and community representatives, colleagues and friends,

It is with enormous gratitude and deep humility that I embrace the opportunity to lead this storied institution.

Responsibility for a public university—this university—is a sacred trust.

The president ultimately is responsible for the welfare of every student and of the faculty and staff members who serve and support them.

As the founding campus of the California State University, and the only public university located in the Silicon Valley—the world’s epicenter of innovation—San Jose State also is a vital intellectual, cultural and economic asset, and an essential community partner, to our city and broader region.

The Board of Trustees, the Chancellor, and all of you, have placed enormous trust in me. And I am determined not to let you down.

This morning’s investiture ceremony—the cloaking of a new leader in garments symbolic of the office—is as sacred as the institution itself.

The ceremony dates back to a Middle Age religious custom and academic tradition.

And the term “*investiture*” is derived from the Latin *investire*, meaning to “clothe” or “cover.” The robes and accompanying garments you see today only occasionally are worn, typically on solemn occasions.

I assure you that I will *not* be walking around in this robe on a typical workday.

Today, however, is no ordinary workday. Neither is it merely “*my day*.”

To be sure, I am full of pride as I embrace the opportunity to lead San Jose State University.

But this also is *our day*. *Our* collective opportunity to celebrate the remarkable legacy of the West’s first public university.

And to imagine the future of what can—and *will*—be America’s premier urban public university.

This, my friends, is our day to reintroduce this proud 160-year old institution to the world.

Over the next few minutes, I hope to do exactly that, while also answering a couple of fundamental questions.

First: how has a professor of English literature and student of the late-sixteenth/early-seventeenth century poet John Donne, come to lead a public university in the Silicon Valley perhaps best known for its stellar programs in science, technology, engineering and mathematics?

A university that supplies more employees to Silicon Valley companies such as Apple than any other.

And second: what is the great granddaughter of Armenian immigrants, a southern California native who had spent all of a nearly thirty-year academic career in the eastern time zone, doing in northern California?

I am here because *my* story is *your* story. **My story is San Jose State’s story.**

Now, every story has compelling characters. Let me begin by introducing you to a few of them.

My three brothers and I were raised in southern California by loving, devoted Armenian-American parents—one born in Hollywood, the other an immigrant from Greece, who came to this country seeking an education.

They were quintessential role models who valued family, community, and education. They taught us to respect tradition and to honor our roots, as well as to be proud citizens of the United States.

A particularly vivid and lasting childhood memory for me is participating in the 1968 groundbreaking of the first Armenian Genocide memorial located on public soil in the United States, in Montebello, California.

Although I was young at the time, even then I grasped the importance of the moment and the power of a community bound together by common purpose and a common history.

Some of you may know that my mother passed away last February on Valentine’s Day, just days after I was appointed to serve as your president. What you may not know is that today would have been her 82nd birthday. And so I feel like I am sharing *our* day with her.

My parents enjoyed a long, happy marriage of 60 years. And another lesson they taught me is that life is better lived in the company of the right partner.

I came to know Dr. Dennis Papazian in 1988 when I left graduate school at UCLA and accepted my first faculty appointment at Oakland University, in the greater Detroit area.

At that time, Dennis was an established, esteemed faculty member at the University of Michigan, Dearborn, a noted Russian historian, and the founding director of the Dearborn campus's Armenian Research Center—the only center of its kind in America.

The child of immigrants from Istanbul displaced by the Armenian Genocide, Dennis himself was the youngest of four siblings. His brother had left to serve the US in the Navy and his two older sisters had taken jobs so that he could attend Wayne State University in Detroit—like San Jose State, a vital urban public university serving students from highly diverse backgrounds, and often the first in their families to attend a four-year university.

Indeed, it turns out that Dennis's story *also* is our story.

Dennis and I were married in 1991. It is implausible that my own career could have evolved as it has without his wisdom, support, adaptability and sacrifice.

Over the years, he turned down several opportunities—including a faculty appointment at the University of California, Irvine—to remain in Michigan, where he could live closer to and care for his aging mother. But when it was time for me to pursue opportunities in academic leadership, he was ready.

Those opportunities eventually took us from Michigan to New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut.

And, finally, for me, back to California, and this wonderful opportunity.

Dennis, I would not have been able to pursue or realize my dreams without you. I am eternally grateful.

Along the way, Dennis and I were blessed with two amazing daughters.

Ani and Marie: you are the lights of our lives. And that is because you are remarkable daughters, willing to share your time with me as I pursued my professional ambitions. My heart bursts with pride at seeing how far you have come, and your dad and I live with joyous anticipation at all that is *yet* to come.

Before going any further, I would like the San Jose State community—my professional “family”—to meet other members of my immediate family and close friends who have joined us today.

I am pleased to introduce my father, Hagop Arshagouni, my brothers Robert, Michael, and Paul and their families, all of whom are with us today, and my uncle, aunts, and many cousins and friends who have joined us from near and far—from as close as the Bay area and Southern California (where I grew up), to as far away as Taiwan, Switzerland, Canada, and from states east that we used to call home: Michigan, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York.

A special welcome to Rector Ruben Mirzakhanyan from the Armenian State Pedagogical University who has travelled from Yerevan, Armenia to be with us and to the Hon. Berj Apkarian, Honorary Consul for the Republic of Armenia.

And to Professor Paul Sellin, a long-time professor of English at UCLA and an incredible scholar and teacher, who first introduced me to Donne and Milton a lifetime ago, and who served as my mentor and dissertation advisor. My academic career would not have been possible without your guidance and friendship.

Thank you all for sharing this special day with us!

I also would like to extend a special thank you to my colleagues who have joined me on stage and offered kind words and reminiscences.

To Millie Garcia, whom I first met in New York and New Jersey (and who is convinced that I am a New Yorker!) and whose passion for our mission and the importance of opportunity for all continues to inspire me.

To Lynn Pasquerella, who has traveled from Washington, D.C. to share this day with us. Your commitment to the liberal arts and learning, to mentorship and possibilities, and to a little fun from time to time, reminds me that we are all working together for a common purpose, and that nothing is impossible if we allow ourselves to dream—and then work hard to fulfill those dreams.

Thank you for your moving words, your friendship, and your commitment to our shared mission. I am grateful to be traveling this road with friends and colleagues like you.

And to Chancellor White, the members of the Board of Trustees, and my fellow CSU Presidents who have joined me today, thank you for your strong leadership and unwavering values. It is a privilege to work with and for you as together we chart the future of America's largest public university system.

To all who have joined us today, since planning for this inauguration and investiture ceremony began, it was always my intention that it be a celebration of our university, its legacy and its promise.

And that is because San Jose State has a remarkably rich and vital history, very much worth celebrating.

We are a campus of many "firsts."

We were the first CSU campus. And, as you have heard, the largest public university in the world—the California State University—started right here as the California State Normal School.

We spawned a southern California satellite campus that became what we know today as UCLA, my *alma mater*.

We offered the first degrees in women's studies and police science in the United States.

We joined with the city of San Jose in building the nation's first co-located municipal/university library. The Martin Luther King, Jr. library (gesture to the building) is a shining example of what is possible when universities think beyond traditional boundaries and work with their neighbors and other institutions.

Yes. Ours is a university of many "firsts."

In 2015, U.S. News ranked our computer engineering program first nationally among public universities offering bachelor's and master's degrees.

The same year, *Business Insider* ranked San Jose State first nationally among universities most likely to help students land a good job in Silicon Valley.

And just last month, *Time Magazine* reported that our humanities graduates were some of the most successful in the country.

Perhaps most important of all—many of our students are also "firsts" themselves.

In fact, close to half of the first-year students who join us each fall come here intending to be the first in their families to earn four-year degrees—degrees that have the potential to transform their lives, as well as the lives of their families and future generations.

To every member of the San Jose State community, I urge you always to remember: Whether you teach and conduct research, administer a program, or help keep the lights on and our buildings and grounds safe, that you are making it possible for dreams to be realized.

And, speaking of dreams, let us return now to those fundamental questions:

Why is a student of English literature, an admirer of 17th-century metaphysical poetry, an Armenian-American mother and daughter, called to lead a university known best for its STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) programs?

And why is a woman leading the only public university in the heart of the Silicon Valley, a place known for innovation and discovery but also described two years ago by *Newsweek* as "...a front line, if not *the* trench of the global gender war"?

I don't think the Trustees made a mistake.

As some of you know, I am a student of literature. The primary object of my academic scholarship, the Renaissance poet John Donne, lived and wrote during a period of great unrest in Western Europe, what I like to call the last great era of innovation.

The Renaissance period, which encompassed Donne's life, bridged the Middle Ages to the modern age. It was a period of awakening.

What happened in the Renaissance changed the course of history, as the understandings that made possible the modern world emerged—in learning, theology, geography, science, astronomy, medicine, literature, theater, and much more.

It was during this period that man's understanding of the universe vastly expanded. The "educated person" rose in stature.

The Scientific Method—the process by which knowledge is discovered and validated—was developed and defined.

The movable type printing press was invented, facilitating the systematic spread of the printed word and, in the 1400s, the Gutenberg Bible came off the press—the first mass-produced book in human history.

Printed music also became available for the first time on a mass scale, so that music itself could develop in new ways.

The Renaissance triggered the democratization of knowledge, making information available in mass quantities on a scale never before encountered.

What has the Renaissance period to do with early-21st century society, or Silicon Valley, or the future direction of a public institution like ours?

Plenty.

The Renaissance was a transformative moment in human history. And we now are in the midst of *another* period of transformative change.

Columnist and author Thomas Friedman in his new book, *Thank You for Being Late*, calls the present day "...one of the greatest inflection points in history."

Friedman's premise is that the greatest forces around us—technology, globalization and climate change—simultaneously are accelerating.

And as a result, society itself is turning on its axis. *Everything* is up for re-examination and re-imagination.

And while clearly these influences are global in scope, this revolution—a second Renaissance—is happening right here, all around us, *in our own backyard*.

As the Silicon Valley's public university, San Jose State is positioned and poised to help reshape the future.

This, I would say, is part of the essential mission of the public university.

Rising to this challenge also is an invitation for *us* to evolve as individuals and as a society. Just as the Renaissance opened mankind's eyes to the reality that we did not sit at the center of the universe with the heavens revolving around us, so the technology age has opened our eyes to other stunning realities, including quantum physics.

Then, as now, humanists and artists were every bit as essential as scientists to comprehending fully the world around us.

Friedman calls this the “Cognitive Era”—the merging of data and interpretive power, spawning things like IBM's Watson supercomputer, the artificial intelligence solution that in 2011 defeated two former champions in a game of *Jeopardy*.

Today, Watson has evolved from playing games to serving more than a dozen of the world's leading cancer institutes. That's *Doctor Watson* to you.

Friedman further argues that preparing college students for careers in this information age demands that we offer more of the “three R's”—reading, writing and arithmetic—as well as more of the “four C's”—creativity, collaboration, communication...and coding.

Coding, collaboration and communication go hand-in-hand-in-hand with creativity!

And anywhere we turn—from healthcare, to agriculture, financial services, telecommunications, retail, and education—we see the convergence of technology and human interaction.

Or, have you not recently visited a doctor? Auto mechanic? Bank? Supermarket? Or called an Uber?

We are living in a new innovation age—a second Renaissance, if you will.

And where better than *here* at San Jose State University, to connect the dots—science and math; the humanities and arts; the social and applied sciences—while taking care to imbue every student with the critical thinking skills they will need to succeed in any industry, any discipline, any vocation, as our times might require?

San Jose State long has been known as the Valley's go-to source for engineering and computing talent. We embrace this, and we celebrate this.

But we also were California's original teacher's college. We have educated and trained most of the Valley's nurses, social workers, graphic artists, journalists, and digital designers. This, too, we celebrate.

How many of you have heard of Edwin Markham? He is among our very earliest alums—Class of 1872. Markham, as described by our own professor of business, Annette Nellen, “...was a teacher, administrator, poet, lecturer, champion of social issues.”

Markham authored several books of poetry and used his artistic craft to influence social thought.

He once wrote that “*poetry writing is as practical as bread-making; and, from a high ground, it is just as necessary to the life of man. Poetry is bread for the spirit; it is the bread that is made of earthly wheat and yet is mixed with some mystic tincture of the skies. It nourishes all the higher hopes and aspirations of man.*”

As a student of poetry, I was thrilled to learn—from a business professor, no less—that a campus best known for its STEM programs also produced such an acclaimed poet.

Of course, we know that San Jose State has a rich legacy in the arts and a deep reservoir of passion and purpose for social good.

Our challenge—and our opportunity—is to seize the moment to influence and shape history meaningfully in *this*, our present Renaissance. This means shaping the lives of our students while actively and thoughtfully engaging in the affairs of our city and region.

Why do I believe we are capable of this audacious calling? To answer this question, let me return to my Armenian-American roots, from which I draw personal inspiration.

The mountains that ring Silicon Valley sometimes remind me of Mount Ararat, the imposing and majestic mountain in eastern Anatolia that overlooks Yerevan, the capital city of the newly independent Republic of Armenia.

Historically, Mt. Ararat was considered to be the ancestral resting place of Noah’s Ark—where human history and life itself was renewed.

My people—the Armenian people—understand the meaning of survival and renewal. The Armenian Genocide destroyed at least a million and a half Armenians between 1915 and 1923—75% of the Armenian people living on their historic lands—and led to what U.S. Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire Henry Morgenthau called, “the murder of a nation.”

Today, three times as many Armenians—an estimated ten million—are scattered throughout the world as are living within the borders of the Republic of Armenia, formed in 1991 after the collapse of the former Soviet Union.

This virtual “nation made up of refugees”—the Armenian diaspora—forges deep connections and unbreakable bonds.

Just a few weeks ago, I visited the American University of Armenia where I was invited to speak at a conference on the empowerment of Armenian girls and women.

There, as here, women confront many barriers to equity. They are paid less than men for the same work; they are underrepresented in many professions and in leadership positions.

My advice to participants at last month's conference was to lean *into*, not away from, the issue of gender equity. No major challenge is surmounted through ignorance or neglect.

And I encouraged attendees to take inspiration from others' efforts to ensure that women enjoy the same opportunities as men.

Which brings us back here, to an interesting fact:

This university in 1862—155 years ago—awarded its first teaching degrees to 54 graduates. The school then was known as the California State Normal School—and all of the graduates were women!

Just last year, in 2016, the California State University under the leadership of the Board of Trustees and Chancellor White filled five presidential vacancies. All of the five new appointees were women.

This is remarkable when you consider that today women hold only 34 presidencies among the nation's top 200 institutions of higher learning—roughly one in six.

Yet virtually half of our California State University campuses—eleven out of twenty-three—are now led by women. Our Chancellor and Trustees truly are progressive!

You can understand why I am so proud to lead a campus that so deeply values diversity, one that attracts students from such diverse religious, cultural, social, and ethnic backgrounds—and one that is devoted to supporting them through a period of uncommon social and political instability.

I am animated by my love of literature and the arts; by my Armenian heritage; and by my pride in being an American and in being part of a growing cohort of female leaders throughout the CSU.

There is something else that animates me in our work together.

My mom.

My mom was born in Hollywood. A brilliant student, she graduated from high school at age 16. She then matriculated to UCLA where she became the first student to be elected Phi Beta Kappa as a junior.

A mentor strongly encouraged my mom to pursue her doctoral degree in education at Stanford. But she had already met my father at UCLA, and they married young—which is what you did in those days—and my three brothers and I were born in short order.

So rather than pursue her doctoral degree, my mom earned a teaching credential. And once my youngest brother started elementary school in the late 60s, she went to teach at the local Armenian high school that had opened in 1965.

This was the first Armenian high school in America. My brothers and I all went there, and my mother taught there for 30 years. We lived next door to the principal and founder of the school; this was very much a community and family affair.

My mother taught English and American history, and actually all history, but English was her first love. She was a fan of the British poet Lord Byron, who himself learned Armenian while living in an Armenian monastery on the island of San Lazarus just off the coast of Venice, Italy.

My mother was *that teacher*—every school seemed to have at least one—who challenged her students and truly prepared them for college. Every one of her students would tell you that college was easier because of how well she prepared them.

She had them writing essays, reading, developing their study skills. She was renowned for the notes that her students had to take and also for her exams.

No multiple-choice tests for *her* students; you had to be able to think *and* write. Her students later said that the discipline on which she insisted was life-changing.

My mother didn't care if you were an "A" student or if you struggled. She saw every student's value and potential. She cared equally for each one. As educators, there is a lesson there for all of us.

My mother died early last year, shortly after I was named to serve as your president. Many of her former students returned for her funeral and all said pretty much the same thing: "*She always valued me.*"

My mother was very excited that Dennis and I were returning to California.

And she was the *one* person I knew who knew that San Jose State had "given birth" to UCLA.

I didn't know it at the time, and nobody else I talked to seemed to know, either—but *she* knew. She had a rich sense of history and wide-ranging knowledge. Who else would do the NY Times crossword puzzle in ink!

Today, May 4th, as I said earlier, would have been her 82nd birthday.

If it isn't already obvious: my mother was a remarkable woman and my role model. And in her memory, I offer this pledge: as your president, I will strive daily to match her compassion for people, her impeccable honesty, her humility, her devotion to students, and her insistence on excellence.

Let me conclude with a few words about our future.

First, let me be clear. We did not need an investiture ceremony—and you did not need a new president—to reaffirm an essential truth: San Jose State University is an extraordinary institution.

Yet its greatness is revealed not through a litany of historical facts, although some of them are quite impressive.

Nor is its greatness proven by any of its buildings, although surely a few are historic and might even evoke a sense of nostalgia.

The true greatness of San Jose State University is revealed in its people. In each of you.

Our people are our legacy. And they are our promise.

Since arriving last July, I have formed many impressions of San Jose State.

None, though, are as powerful or memorable as the opportunities I have had to listen to and engage with people on our campus and in our community.

In the course of a year that at times has been uncommonly stressful, I have observed endless examples of people extending their hands and their hearts to care for others.

I witnessed this in the wake of a divisive national election. And I witnessed it again in the wake of devastating local floods.

The same values that animated my youth—concern for others' welfare and a commitment to doing the right thing rather than the easy thing—animate our campus and community.

And why would they not? Many of our students, including the thousands who are first in their families to pursue four-year degrees and those from immigrant families and foreign lands—are true risk-takers.

If they are willing to step out of *their* comfort zones, I believe we can step beyond ours.

I also believe we are capable of working together to find ways to work more seamlessly.

I believe we are capable of increasing collaborations across academic disciplines and beyond established administrative structures and organizations.

And I believe we can dream bigger dreams. And take bigger risks.

In fact, I know we can do all of this. And more.

Many of you have heard me say that great cities and great universities go together.

In New Haven, I led a public university that for a very long time sat in the shadow of an elite Ivy League university. I believe you've heard of it—its name rhymes with “Whale.”

Perseverance, self-confidence and sheer effort put Southern Connecticut State University on the map. Its impact throughout the region has steadily and measurably increased.

San Jose State is vital to *this* city's intellectual, cultural and economic vitality. We are essential to this region's prosperity and quality of life.

Evidence of this is all around us. This includes our alumni—now more than a quarter-million strong, a majority of whom live in the immediate Bay Area.

It includes the forty thousand students and employees who animate this campus every weekday.

It includes the countless visitors we attract year-round.

And it includes the many university-sponsored programs and activities that bring year-round intellectual, cultural, social and economic diversity to our city and region.

Ours is a great university, sitting in the heart of a great city. Together, our capacity to do great things is limitless.

We know some of what lies ahead. We will build a new science and innovation complex, opening doors to academic and research partnerships.

We will expand and renovate spaces here and on our south campus.

We will seek opportunities to expand further our footprint beyond our present borders and into the city.

We will collaborate in producing a long-term strategic plan to inform and guide our decisions.

We will prepare for and launch a comprehensive philanthropic campaign to attract the private support necessary for us to reach our full potential of success and service.

We will join leaders from city and regional government and private industry in seeking solutions to vital quality-of-life issues.

History also suggests that we will encounter unanticipated opportunities—and an unexpected challenge, or two.

And I am confident that we will be ready for whatever comes our way.

And why am I so confident? Because I believe in you. I believe in *us*. And I am committed to being here to see our dreams fulfilled.

We are the inheritors of a grand, 160-year old legacy. And while the work ahead may at times seem daunting, before us sit limitless possibilities.

The future is ours. Let's go for it! It's time to get started!

Thank you!