

## CHANGE COMING TO KSU

Amid tough times, university sticks to long-term goals

Mary Evans Sias Published: October 3, 2012 12:00AM

As a daughter of the South, the fall season has always captured my heart. I welcome autumn's flurry of golden-hued leaves, cool breezes and the change it heralds. On Kentucky State University's campus, that same spirit of change is imminent, and it is good. In a week's time, our alumni will come home to reminisce on the past and take in all that has advanced on campus, as students and others welcome them back for the Homecoming Football Game and many other Homecoming activities. On Oct. 4, in another fall tradition, the focus will be on the university's next five years and on securing its long-term future.

I'll issue the call for our university community to assemble and reconnect with one another, and to review and highlight our progress and the tremendous opportunities and challenges that lie before us. Most importantly, this year's State of the University Address will be unlike others I have given in the past because everyone will leave with an assignment and a simple message — Commitment, Accountability and Student Success at KSU. The change starts now.

Kentucky State University has a proud history of educating and training students, serving the community of Frankfort and beyond, and helping to fuel the state's economy as one of the city's top employers. We've maintained our U.S. News and World Report ranking as one of the nation's best liberal arts institutions, and we are currently ranked 26th among historically black colleges and universities. In August the Princeton Review, which compiles a similar list, named KSU a Best College in the Southeast. Even with these recognitions, sometimes our best isn't good enough.

After just over 125 years as the commonwealth's only historically black land-grant university, we remain a work in progress. Times are tougher; however, those thirsting for education are demanding even more from this great institution. The university has lost about 25 percent of its appropriations over the last seven years; but even in the midst of these biting cuts, we remain steadfast and fervently poised to deliver. We've had to learn how to operate more efficiently and effectively while addressing critical issues in enrollment, programs and services, teaching, facilities and administration.

These are challenging economic times for all of higher education. Colleges and universities across the nation are struggling to stay afloat while keeping tuition from being prohibitive, but historically black colleges and universities that were already underfunded are suffering disproportionately in this current fiscal crisis. KSU is striving to improve its fiscal plan, an especially daunting undertaking in economic times like these. It has helped to have strong advocates for education, and for KSU in particular, in the legislature and beyond. But at the end of the day, we know that a faltering economy has hit KSU hard and its students even harder.

In recent months and years, the way forward for KSU has been further tested. The university was the fastest growing public four-year institution in the commonwealth. It experienced a 5 percent increase in enrollment in 2006-2007 and a 7.9 percent increase in 2007-2008. This academic semester, we have experienced an 11 percent decrease in overall enrollment and when KSU's enrollment is down, Frankfort's economy also feels the pinch. As we work to rebuild our student enrollment, we know that budget cuts and the economy have contributed to the loss. But change is coming and our focus will be on addressing several major imperatives.

Our emphasis will be on ramping up our commitment to the needs of struggling, motivated students with increased need-based scholarship awards; instilling a culture of student success that engages every facet of university life and that supports students inside and outside of the classroom; realigning current resources to more effectively support retention and persistence efforts; and devising a completion agenda that supports educating and graduating all the students that we admit.

We have our eyes focused on the future when it comes to reaching a total enrollment of 4,300 students by the year 2020, in line with the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education's goals. And we are putting in place the people and plans for helping us get there. Faculty and alumni will play a pivotal role. At KSU, we take pride in celebrating our high achieving students who are our ambassadors in the community and academic scholars, such as James Lawson Whites, one of our recent graduates who earned a perfect score on his law school admissions exam.

At the same time, we make no apology for providing unprecedented opportunities for students to pursue their dream of earning a college degree, even when many come to us with little more than that dream to begin their journey. With their dreams in tow, we know that it's not enough to be satisfied with just admitting them to KSU. At least 60 percent of our students come to the university blazing uncharted trails as the first in their families to ever go to college. And another 80 percent of our undergraduates arrive at our door academically underprepared.

We continue to see examples of success with our students, however, as a result of a dedicated faculty that continues to do an exceptional job of supporting students. An example of this is Le Artis Allen, who came to KSU as a freshman in need of a year of academic remediation before he could advance. Today, he is working part time at a job with a major Kentucky employer and is also in graduate school. And that is why the work at KSU must begin today to renew efforts so that all who enter here graduate within six years or less as proud degree earners. The commonwealth of Kentucky and the world are waiting for all that our graduates have to offer. But for now, commitment, accountability and student success start here.

Mary Evans Sias, Ph.D., is the 13th president of Kentucky State University.