

August 3, 2020

Dear UConn Nation,

I write to you today on the one-year anniversary of my tenure as your President. Had I imagined a year ago what I would be writing to you now, I could not have guessed that I would have so much to write about! And yet, in many ways this is the year I expected – full of challenges and opportunities. It is just that some of the challenges we knew beforehand, and some we didn't.

This is very much a tale of two half-years. The first six months of my presidency were not unlike those of many new presidents: getting to know the people, programs and places that comprise a great public flagship university, building a leadership team, listening and sharing ideas, and yes, making a few mistakes.

From the beginning, I cannot state often enough how warm and welcoming the Husky Nation and my new home state have been, and the gratitude I feel to everyone I work with on a daily basis. Or how much I have enjoyed the privilege of being part of the special traditions unique to UConn – from the welcome convocation of a record-setting freshman class with its moving candlelight ceremony of community togetherness to the emotional cutting of the wristbands at the end of Huskython (another record setter), to my first games in Gampel, performances at Jorgensen and openings at the Benton with so many of our wonderful neighbors. There were wonderful coffee receptions to get to know the unique flavor of each of our regional campuses. Then there was the incredible energy of alumni events like “The Future is Blue and White” at Pratt & Whitney and UConn Day at Citi Field with the Mets, to name a few. I remember the moving speeches by awardees at the annual staff recognition ceremony, to a person crediting their success and their joy to the people they work with.

I have been inspired as well by our students and their talent and passion for making the University better for fellow students and the world at large. It was an honor to join in marches and forums for action on climate change, social justice and mental health needs, even as those marches ultimately led to my office door.

In the final days of what would be the end of my new president type of calendar, I had the pleasure of meeting dozens of incredibly generous and interesting donors to the University in a four-day trip crisscrossing Florida.

Then came March, when we and the world were struck in succession by the two scourges of COVID-19 and racism.

UConn responded. Nimble is not a word usually used to describe a large research university, but we were: Moving 5,000 courses online and completing an imperfect semester without canceling a single one; responding to students' need to understand the broader context of the world-changing events by creating a

one-credit University Course on COVID that became the most subscribed course in the history of UConn with more than 4,000 students completing it. And, we are creating another University Course on Anti-Black Racism (coming this fall). We kept nearly 1,000 students who could not go home safe and well in our dorms. Meanwhile, UConn Health pivoted its entire ICU to treating the onslaught of the disease, saving hundreds of lives.

But UConn did more than just survive a pandemic this year; it moved forward. We graduated our largest, most diverse and most academically successful class ever last May. And the first-ever virtual ceremony, though not what our graduates had hoped for when they began, was filled with the bittersweet emotion of commencement. This was captured in the moving and inspirational speeches by our first-ever Rhodes Scholar Wawa Gatheru, Coach Geno, the Governor, and School of Nursing doctoral candidate and UConn faculty member Jamie Gooch. And with 45,000 total views, it was by far the largest commencement attendance ever.

Other major steps forward include the Connecticut Commitment, eliminating tuition for Connecticut families with incomes below \$50,000 per year. We opened the new 191,000-square-foot Student Recreation Center in August, appointed new members to the President's Council on Race and Diversity in October, created the President's Working Group on Sustainability in November and the President's Working Group on Mental Health and Wellness in January. We opened the new Synchrony Digital Technology Center in Stamford and announced a major gift from Synchrony to the Connecticut Commitment in December. And this July, we officially returned to the Big East, though it may take a little while to begin building the new memories we all know are coming!

By the numbers, this was the best year in UConn's history. Despite the pandemic and while it was going on, UConn grew research expenditures and new awards to a new high of \$280 million, won four large center competitions and set a new record for philanthropy of \$89.5 million – an increase of 25% over last year. The University received more external recognition for faculty and students than ever before, including eight National Science Foundation Early Career Awards (top 20 among all universities nationally), and the maximum Goldwater Awards (four) for outstanding STEM undergraduates for the first time.

Looking ahead, we are well positioned for the year to come. No one knows exactly what lies ahead, but we have approached the future with relentless preparation along with recognition of the need for flexibility to change as circumstances dictate. We have a strong plan for re-entry, designed to protect the health of our community while providing as much of the residential experience we value as we can in a de-densified approach.

The success we have had to date and no doubt in the future is a story of drawing upon our sense of community. I am so proud of the way our faculty, staff and students supported each other in the transition we experienced. No one was ever hired to be a coronavirus response coordinator at UConn, yet we have a team who has taken this on heroically and tirelessly. Last week I was on a Webex meeting with one of our teams made up of staff from 15 departments - many of whom had never worked together before - ranging from senior administrators to junior staff, working as one because that is what this challenge requires.

Finally, I wish to share something I have learned over the course of this past year about this University. UConn is in many ways the pride of Connecticut. That is in part for the amazing things it has achieved. But it is perhaps more for what it aspires to. It is relentless in pursuit of its values – truth, excellence, respect and equity. It is not satisfied with where it is, but committed to be ever better. And it sees no reason it cannot be the best in whatever it undertakes. Neither can I. Thank you for your support and dedication in what has been a strangely gratifying year, and I look forward to the privilege of navigating with you our beloved institution in the year ahead.

Sincerely,

Tom