

Inauguration Address

Robert M. Pignatello
15th President
Lock Haven University
March 1, 2019

It is a distinct honor to be before you today officially installed as the 15th President of Lock Haven University. This is such a grand celebration for all of us. As Haven Nation looks confidently ahead and embraces new horizons with confidence, renewed sense of purpose and almost 150 years of distinguished service and impact behind us. We should all look forward to a future that will be full of new opportunities to serve our community and fulfill our mission.

There are many people to recognize and thank before I reflect a bit upon my personal journey to this day and then upon my hopes and aspirations for this next chapter in our history.

First - loved ones who are here, and some who are not, who mean everything to me.

My life partner Amy - whom many of you have gotten to know and has embraced Lock Haven as much as I have. We are making this journey together. I am grateful for your love and support and I send it back to you.

The most important title I will ever have is Dad. I acknowledge my daughters Teresa and Ava who will always be my little girls and my everything, but have all of a sudden grown up to become confident, independent young women. My pride and love for them could not be stronger. Teresa is here with her boyfriend Chris Atwater.

My wonderful and caring sister Cora Ciaramello and her husband Artie. Like all families we have celebrated so many good times and some tough ones too. So glad you are here.

My cousin Gary Pignatello and his family, lifelong friend Andy Abbate and colleagues from John Jay College CUNY, who all came a long way to be here.

And I dedicate today to my mother Clara who could not be here and is back home in NJ convalescing. A mother's love is like no other.

I thank the inauguration committee led by Ashley Koser who worked so hard on this day. Their names are in the program. And the students who provided the poetry and music and our ROTC, who all helped make this a truly memorable occasion.

Our outstanding volunteer boards: George Durrwachter Chair of our Council of Trustees, Robert Maguire President of the Foundation, Jean Nestlerode President of the SAS, and Joseph Kohler representing the Alumni Board who are here. They are our partners who are dedicated to doing what is best for LHU.

The local officials I have gotten to know like our County Commissioners, the City Council, Mayor Baney, and our new State Representative Stephanie Borowicz. Many of whom are here. Our new school superintendent Jackie Martin and Mayor Campana from Williamsport who are here.

I am honored that two former presidents, Craig Willis and Keith Miller, are in attendance. I welcome you back to The Haven.

To my fellow system presidents here. There is so much talent and passion among you and I thank you for your welcome into the State System council of presidents.

Those delegates who traveled here today representing their universities joining us to celebrate the importance of higher education.

PASSHE is so courageously led by our new Chancellor Dan Greenstein and the Chair of our Board of Governors, Cynthia Shapira, and governor Don Houser Jr. a local favorite.

I wish to recognize our dedicated executive staff and administration who are working hard to serve all of you.

I thank Fulton Bank for their sponsorship of today's celebration.

And all the students, faculty, coaches, staff, and alumni who are here. YOU are LHU! YOU are Haven nation. I thank you for your welcome, your advice and your engagement.

My story begins with my father Rocco. He and my mother were both immigrants from Italy. The fulfillment of their American Dream became my reality.

They had no formal education beyond grade school. We were a working class family. Dad was a custodian. Fiercely patriotic (the symbolism of bald eagles has always meant so much to me) and he was a voracious reader who liked to keep up on political news. He always pushed me to be better.

I attended the local state university – nearby and affordable. I learned to appreciate public service and determined that was I wanted to do with my life. I held local elected office – but after losing an election in the early 90’s, I became frustrated with politics. I took another career path I was certain would be less political. Higher Education.

In 1994 an Italian cousin enrolled in a student exchange program here at Lock Haven. She stayed with my parents during winter break and I transported her back and forth to NJ. Little did I know then what was to be.

At CUNY I spent 24 plus years helping to create affordable pathways for struggling families on the lower end of the economic ladder and first generation students.

It was those experiences and that background that drew me here – to be in a position to help families like mine.

What I discovered here at LHU was a university with a compelling mission and a strong liberal arts foundation. I found that we have so many quality programs, superb facilities - and I discovered the breathtaking beauty of this region. I met alumni who speak so passionately about how their LHU degree changed their lives and want to do more for their alma mater.

I found elected officials and other community leaders who are eager to partner with us and understand that we are an integral part of a successful city and region.

I found faculty, staff, and coaches who are so dedicated to our students and want to be engaged, valued and be a bigger part of the governing process.

And I found such impressive students. I have spent a lot of time talking and listening to them. In all kinds of settings: Here at the fieldhouse, in their residence halls on game night, at the rec center, on the trolley, or at Bentley Dining Hall. They have the best advice about how we can make their experience even better. We just have to listen to them. Let’s applaud them right now!

During these nine months to the day I have been president, the importance of our efforts has been reaffirmed. I have been working to uncover and discover the ideas that can form the basis of a shared vision we can embrace, that will strengthen and sustain us. And to keep the spotlight on all our successes. I have learned a lot and am still learning.

You might also say I have been in “building” mode.

Building confidence, optimism, and excitement to raise our profile and promote our value and impact. Building Trust and relationships – internally and externally. I believe in shared governance. I vowed nine months ago that this would be an administration that would be open, transparent, and collaborative. We have adapted new ways to involve all stakeholders to participate and create a new strategic direction together. Internally, we have done that through town meetings, leadership councils, regular consultation, and fostering more productive relations with our bargaining units. Externally, I am working to make LHU a stronger community partner by immersing myself in community activities and engaging community leaders.

Our students come here because they get the personal attention and collective support a smaller school like us can offer. I hear it from them all the time. Here they find a second home where they can make a successful transition from high school or transfer from somewhere else that might be too big and overwhelming. They can even bring their pets now! We can use to greater advantage our size, faculty-student ratio, and personal touch to appeal to prospective students who feel they will be more comfortable at a smaller campus. Let us be the “big campus alternative” that they are looking for and need to receive the personal attention and support we excel at providing.

They come here because we are an inclusive community, with values that guide our mission. Where you are treated like a full member of the community no matter where you are from or what your identity.

They come here because they are attracted by our mission of service and to pursue careers to help others improve their lives by becoming educators, social workers, counselors, health care professionals, and more.

They come here because we are an engine for upward mobility -- #4 in System – we create affordable pathways to success – moving students from the bottom 60% to the top 40% of wage earning capability. This transforms lives.

George Bernard Shaw said life is not so much about finding yourself. But about creating yourself. That is what we do here. We want every student who walks under the archway you all came through today to believe they can “soar higher” because of the experience they had at The Haven. To leave here with skills, confidence, and judgment driving them to do better and be better. Unafraid, unbound, and uninhibited. We open that door for them.

But higher education has experienced an erosion of public trust in recent years. We have to work harder to earn that trust back and convince those who remain skeptical that it is a worthy investment that pays important societal dividends. I believe in the power of public higher education and making the mission of our great University accessible, more affordable and of the highest value possible. It is a public good and not a private privilege.

Our students are from working class families like mine was, 60% PELL and state aid eligible -- we cannot put the cost of a college education out of their reach.

Our new Chancellor understands this well. He is leading us to ask the right questions and develop the right answers. What is student success? How can we be more efficient, affordable, create better student support strategies and better opportunities for them?

What do successful universities look like and how can the system organize itself to best answer these questions?

We are challenged by rising mandatory costs, less state support, and fewer college age students. We operate in a marketplace with many other institutions which are vying for the same smaller number of students. We must be more competitive to address our enrollment challenges. And we must adapt to the market place. That is taking shape now at Lock Haven University.

We are raising our profile and visibility and talking in more purposeful ways about our mission and value. We are working to provide more needs based aid to make coming here more affordable and accessible, and working to increase the yield of accepted students. We have also begun working more closely with our regional school districts to make it easier for current high-school students to take our courses while still in high school.

And we should use athletics more strategically to attract students and support from alumni and other donors.

We need to do better at keeping the students we have enrolled, especially those from the first to second year. It actually costs less to keep existing students than to recruit new ones. That's why focusing on the quality of their experiences and the service we provide them is important.

This also means fundraising will be a major focus. We are strengthening our development structure and reorganized our advancement function to mount our next major fundraising campaign linked to our 150th anniversary to raise more scholarships and aggressively market LHU.

We want to provide options for learning and growth to students at all levels. A high percentage of adults in our region are without a postsecondary credential, which is why I believe we should make lifelong learning central to what we do and embrace the adult learner and non-traditional student.

We have opportunities to expand offerings connected to local workforce and employer needs through associate degrees, as well as credit and non-credit bearing certificates. We have therefore begun the important work of building out our programs to meet market demands, and are looking to close the skills gap with new, job-ready credential programs in order to meet the needs of the people in our region and employers by providing a variety of credentials to fuel the economic engine for our Commonwealth.

In the near term we will focus on our strengths and on collaboration.

Just last week we established a school of nursing to put all of our nursing programming under one administrative structure. A framework which will allow us to expand nursing to the main campus here and create nursing programs at all degree levels at the main campus and Clearfield.

I commend our provost, Donna Wilson, for her diligent efforts in spearheading this initiative. There are related health care programs I would like to see us pursue where there is demand we can help meet. This will mean deeper partnerships with health care providers, and working with other educational institutions and organizations. We have begun those earnest conversations with UPMC and Geisinger. The way forward involves greater collaboration – our success depends on creating these alliances.

I think it is indisputable that we live in a global community that links technology, economics, and mass culture and we must look for even more ways to provide those global competencies and cultural experiences to our students to be better citizens and job applicants.

Our emphasis on experiential learning is so relevant today -- where our students actively use what is learned in the classroom in real life situations. This is a big part of our mission, which we do very well.

A word now about the times we find ourselves in. Unfortunately, today we have a crisis of civility in our society. This should concern us all. Tolerance for incivility breeds hate. Hate breeds violence. We must more strongly focus on the need to respect another's right to have opinions different from ours. We must talk more about how to resolve disputes and conflicts in a civil manner - not by talking over and yelling at each other. But by listening, understanding, and looking for common ground.

Let us aspire to decency. Let us practice civility and respect one another. Let us enhance our ethic of care and inclusion. Let us place service to our fellow citizens at the very top of what we value when we talk about what makes this University a place that is distinctive and contributes to a better community. Let us look for ways to instill this more into our curriculum and our educational vision.

We have served with distinction since 1870. So, we will be celebrating our 150th anniversary next year. Today and into next year we usher in the next chapter in our history. This semester I appointed a 150th Anniversary planning committee to help us map out our celebration. Appreciating our great history will help us define a great future.

That future will be a successful one by pursuing a strategy for growth, excellence, adaptation, and innovation. We will need to be bold, assertive, and purposeful.

I know that we all care about our students. We all care about our mission. I know we all care about our community outside these campus walls. In the end it is up to us to convert our challenges into opportunities.

This is why I also know that no matter what obstacles are before us, by working collaboratively we can solve problems and seize those opportunities. We can control our own destiny and make it one that better serves our students and our community if we – all of us represented here today – join hands to soar higher together.

I believe in LHU. I believe in us. Let's go forward Bald Eagles. Thank you for being here.