

OPENING DAY ADDRESS 2023
Dr. Lamont O. Repollet, President
Kean University

Good morning!

Thank you, Chair Fastook, for that kind introduction.

Welcome to all of the Kean University Board members, including John Kean Jr. and Bertha Little-Mathews. I want to once again thank you for your unwavering confidence in my ability to lead this great university.

Let me also welcome Wenzhou-Kean University board member and Union County Commissioner Al Mirabella, and chair of the Kean Alumni Board Ed Esposito.

And good morning to all of the elected officials joining us here today, especially our good friend and Kean alumnus Mayor Chris Bollwage of Elizabeth.

I thank all of you for your support and for believing in me and the work we do for our students, the Kean community, and the region.

Special gratitude to my wife, Darlene, and my daughters Lauryn and Taylor. Thank you for always being there for me when it matters – and it *always* matters. I love you.

I also want to recognize our Wenzhou-Kean University campus community in China, who are joining us virtually, as well as our Kean family on the Ocean County College campus. Sending a shout out to everyone at our Manahawkin and Skylands campuses, too.

Last but not least, to the faculty, staff and students right here in Wilkins Theatre – Welcome. It’s wonderful to be with you.

Good morning, Cougar Nation!

Kean University reaches far and wide. Our Cougar family has an impact from South Jersey to North Jersey – and, of course, in the newly established Central Jersey.

Let's take a look at what we call *The Kean Corridor*.

As you can see, the Kean Corridor extends from the top of Bergen County to Cape May, from Monmouth County to Trenton.

As we deepen our engagement with urban communities around New Jersey, we will expand the Kean Corridor even more.

But let's focus on the here and now. The energy in this room is palpable – my heart swells with a mix of pride, anticipation and gratitude.

It's hard to believe this is my fourth Opening Day address as president of Kean University! As we begin a new academic year, I'm just as excited, proud and humbled to lead this dynamic and thriving University as I was on day one.

We are on a transformational journey together, and the path ahead of us is full of innovation, progress and success. Over the past three years, we achieved remarkable milestones, uplifting our community, and building a stronger, more vibrant Kean University. Our collective efforts propel us forward. As we begin our fourth year together, I am filled with a renewed sense of purpose and determination.

Let's take a moment to reflect on some of what we have achieved.

This Fall, we welcome the largest registered number of new students in Kean's history. Our worldwide enrollment will top 17,000 students joining us from 82 different countries and 35 states. I want us all to stop and think about just how far the Kean brand reaches across the globe.

Our financial position is strong despite challenging times for many in higher education. Both Moody's and Standard & Poor's commended our strategic investments and maintained our strong ratings. I want to thank everyone across this University who contributed to this success.

We are New Jersey's Urban Research University and we are well on our way to earning classification as an R2 Research Institution by the Carnegie Commission.

We are an anchor institution committed to serving our surrounding communities and urban centers across New Jersey in a variety of ways.

We evolved from a teacher's college to a regional university, and today – we are proud to be a national university.

Kean continues to Climb Higher.

The College of Business and Public Management this year received accreditation from the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, considered the gold standard of accreditation for business colleges worldwide. Kean now joins an elite group of less than 6% of colleges and universities worldwide with AACSB accreditation. I cannot stress how important this is for Kean and its potential to bolster the academic excellence of our students. It will open doors for our students, faculty and

alumni. My thanks to Dean Jin Wang and his team in the college for spearheading this important work.

We continue our legacy of providing students with a world-class education, and now we can proudly say we also provide a world-class *research* education. Our students now regularly engage in research opportunities, alongside our dynamic faculty, much of which serves the larger community.

Now, what does it mean to be an urban research university?

It means conducting research on real-world problems and developing sustainable solutions to issues in our communities.

Our research has an impact, and the right people are noticing.

Kean faculty and students advance scientific discoveries that effect change across a variety of industries and professions,

including health care, architecture and design, the arts and sciences, business and government, to name a few.

One environmental research team, whose work began with a project in Keyport in Monmouth County, currently focuses on issues affecting New Jersey's coastal communities including climate change and other stressors.

Dr. Brenna Levine, assistant professor of biology in The Dorothy and George Hennings College of Science, Mathematics and Technology, led groundbreaking research that felt like it was straight from the plot of a *Jurassic Park* movie. Dr. Levine wrote a software program that proves female crocodiles can reproduce without a mate. This mind-boggling evolutionary finding sheds new light on our understanding of the ancestors of crocodiles – the dinosaurs.

The team's findings were reported around the world, putting a spotlight on Kean's burgeoning identity as a national research university.

And, Dr. Levine is not alone in generating recognition for scholarly research.

Kean professors earned prestigious National Science Foundation grants to conduct research and to promote STEM education, particularly for students from educationally disadvantaged areas. This past year alone, Kean faculty secured more than \$18 million in grant funding. This is a significant increase from prior years, and it's amazing to see how quickly our research productivity is exploding

Dr. Matt Niepielko received an NSF CAREER grant for his genetic research. The award will be used to create a program that

combines research with opportunities for students, especially those from minority or underrepresented communities.

Dr. Aaron Gubi is tackling the mental health crisis among young people head-on in Belleville schools, with a \$4.5 million U.S. Department of Education grant designed to address students' well-being while helping to diversify the mental health field.

A \$3 million National Science Foundation grant awarded to Dr. David Joiner, and his interdisciplinary team of Kean collaborators, is funding a program improving recruitment and retention of underrepresented students in STEM fields.

Equity in Action Presidential Fellow Dr. Saran Nurse received a grant to research the resilience of Black-owned businesses after natural disasters, COVID-19, civil unrest and gentrification.

And Drs. Christopher Bellitto and Xurong Kong in the history department spent their summer as Fulbright Scholars – Dr. Bellitto in The Netherlands and Dr. Kong in Japan.

Earlier this year, University Relations created the *Urban Impact* podcast to showcase the research and scholarship underway at Kean to an international audience. We had 850 downloads of our first season in 19 states and 7 countries. Topics included the use of artificial intelligence in higher education, the role of invasive species in urban environments, and the importance of supporting the whole family as an integral part of a child's education. The sheer variety of these topics highlights the depth of our faculty's scholarship and expertise.

Thanks to Senior Vice President Dr. Michael Salvatore and Vice President Barbara George Johnson for serving as wonderful hosts, and Vice President of University Relations Karen Smith and her team for bringing it to life. We can't wait for Season 2!

We are also proud of the research and exciting work underway on our Wenzhou campus.

This Fall, our first cohort of Kean USA students to study at WKU since the pandemic began their international journey, and we are excited for the unique educational and cultural experience in store for them. We also welcome to Kean USA more than 100 WKU students who arrived on campus this week for a year of studies here in New Jersey. Some of them are here with us today, so let's give them a round of applause!

This year, I had the good fortune of returning to WKU for the first time since before the pandemic, and I assure you, the campus is thriving.

Take a look.

Our team will be back at WKU in October to complete some of the initiatives we started during our last visit and to build on our successes.

There are so many reasons why we are bursting with Kean Cougar pride. Every day, our students give us reasons to cheer.

Alejandro Chavez-Mayoral, a junior in the computer science program, was chosen for a competitive NSF Research Experience for Undergraduates this past summer at the University of Rochester.

Gabriel Serrano, a senior computer science student, received a coveted internship at Amazon this summer in their Fraud Protection unit. While there, he designed and implemented a scalable service that monitors the performance and accuracy of machine learning models, which are used to make predictions, find patterns and classify data.

Our architecture and design students collaborated with students from Yale University, Syracuse University and the universities of Miami, Florida and South Florida, to reimagine the campus of New College of Florida as it works to address environmental, sustainability and other challenges.

And, I love this next one because it involves two sets of twin sisters who all plan to be doctors. Dhairavi and Dhaara Shah – both of them juniors studying molecular biology – and Estella Blankson, a senior biology student, and her sister Esther, who graduated in May, are leveraging their research experience at Kean to build their resumes for medical school.

Then there's senior marketing major Sebastian Salazar. Everyone describes him as a go-getter. He created the Kean Sports Business Club for students interested in careers in sports management, and through networking and hard work, now works

with both the New York Jets and the New York Giants, as a Game Day Representative and Brand Ambassador.

And, speaking of sports ...

Our student athletes are making their mark, too, in both academics and in their respective sports. Shout out to the Football team in the audience today! You can see them in action this Saturday at our first home game in Alumni Stadium.

Three programs captured post-season championships. Field Hockey and Women's Volleyball claimed Eastern College Athletic Conference (ECAC) tournament championships. And, our incredible Women's Swimming team became one of just three programs to win the New Jersey Athletic Conference (NJAC) championship... and they deserved it! They were undefeated all season.

Ten of Kean Athletics' programs were acknowledged for their academic success by their individual coaches association's awards. Seven student-athletes were named All-Americans, and two standouts were named Academic All-Americans: Women's Basketball player Shannon McCoy and Field Hockey player Jenna Flemings. Our student athletes ended the Spring 23 semester with an overall department GPA of 3.17.

There is more sports greatness to come as Kean Athletics continues to expand. Men's and women's Outdoor Track and Field begin this year and, in Fall 2024, we will add men's and women's golf.

Our status as a national university reflects the University's continued strides in research and scholarship, as well as our wide range of undergraduate majors, master's and doctoral programs, and, of course, our emphasis on faculty research.

At Kean, we say Cougars Climb Higher, and we practice what we preach.

We know how far we must go to be competitive with the nation's great research universities, and we are laser focused on getting there. That's one of the reasons we are pursuing R2 research status from Carnegie.

So what does an R2 research university look like?

- Have a strong research focus. – Check.
- Prioritize community engagement and collaboration. – Check.
- Actively seek partnerships with local industries, governments, and community organizations to address regional challenges and contribute to economic development. – Check.
- Leverage our expertise and resources to provide valuable support to surrounding communities. – and Check!

We are well on our way to achieving this major milestone – and, I promise you, it will be a game changer for every single one of us.

A reality of academic life is that research requires funding, and on that front, Kean is also making significant strides.

Kean received more than \$4 million from the 2023 federal spending bill. My gratitude to our elected officials, particularly New Jersey Senators Robert Menendez and Cory Booker and U.S. Representatives Donald Payne Jr. and Bonnie Watson Coleman, for helping us to secure funding to support several major initiatives including: a higher education program for middle and high school students and their families; a neighborhood revitalization project in Trenton; and expanded research facilities for life science and biotech startups housed at Kean – all of which are designed to improve the lives of people in our communities.

We also are extremely fortunate to have the support of leaders like New Jersey Senate President Nicholas Scutari, a Kean alumnus whom we honored at our Gala in June. Senator Scutari this year led the effort to award Kean more than \$70 million dollars in new state support. These funds will help establish Kean as a leader in public health and bioscience initiatives in the region, and to do it in partnership with the County of Union. I want to publicly thank the Senator and other leaders from Union County and beyond who understand the value of what Kean offers our students and our state. My thanks to them for their ongoing leadership and commitment to our University and its students.

Our \$2 million grant-funded partnership with the New Jersey Division of Fire Safety, meanwhile, is celebrating its 20th year with Kean. The training program recently earned both national and international fire safety accreditation. Keep up the great work!

Our campus life is rich and our partnerships run deep. I recently read a new report from the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia that examined the impact of anchor institutions on local economies. Researchers created the first-ever Anchor Economy Dashboard using a national data set to capture the economic importance of institutions of higher education and hospitals.

They concluded that anchor institutions are “central to efforts to drive economic equity” because of the “multiple ways we are tied to place.”

We have a vested interest in uplifting the communities we serve. We are part of the community – as an institution and as individuals. Kean's contributions help strengthen local and regional economies and stabilize the region during times of economic uncertainty.

Anchor institutions, like Kean, play a pivotal role in our society and contribute to the greater good of the community.

So what makes Kean such an incredible anchor institution?

The New Jersey Association of State Colleges and Universities reported that its member institutions, including Kean, are part of the economic engine that generates an estimated \$6.1 billion for the state each year – contributing to the tax revenue as well as supporting 36,000 jobs alongside \$2 billion in labor income! For every \$1 million in state funds invested, the colleges and universities produce \$16 million in economic activity. That incredible figure alone shows the value of our institutions to this state.

Kean also supports local businesses and the economy.

Our Institute for Life Science Entrepreneurship (ILSE) has an apprenticeship program to train workers for life science careers, providing both in-class learning and on-the-job training.

Our University plays a crucial role in driving economic equity.

We help young students and non-traditional students earn a college degree and climb higher in their own lives.

- The Kean University Building Stronger (KUBS) Urban Communities program introduces middle and high school students to higher education through athletics.
- Our Entrepreneurial Education Initiatives Division is forging viable pathways to a college degree for Pre-K to 12th grade students across New Jersey

- KEANetwork partners with businesses, governmental organizations and nonprofits to offer a reduced-cost Kean education to their employees and active members.
- Through the Some College, No Degree program, Kean is actively engaging adults who left college without earning a degree and encouraging them to return to the University and earn their degrees.
- Our partnership with College Steps provides customized support for students who face challenges to learning and socializing, including autism and issues with executive functioning, and connects them to other students as peer mentors.

The symbiotic relationship between anchor institutions and their communities is a pathway for sustainable progress, innovation and enhanced quality of life for all.

It's clear that being an anchor institution is deeply ingrained in Kean's identity. Our ties to our communities run deep. We are here to uplift, empower and create lasting, positive change.

Anchor institutions also enhance local culture and promote creativity, diversity and community engagement through the performing and visual arts.

Kean has long been a cultural hub for the community.

Kean Stage, Premiere Stages, the Galleries at Kean, and the talent within our theatre and music conservatories, are second to none.

Coming up this season is Premiere's September production of *Selling Kabul*, a Pulitzer Prize finalist and New Jersey premiere.

Next month, we welcome Tony Award-winning star of stage and

screen, Alex Newell, to Enlow Hall, and renowned singer and *American Pie* icon, Don McLean, will be at Wilkins Theatre.

We are also excited to welcome a local talent, and a Kean alumnus, as our artist-in-residence.

Let's check out visual artist Ricardo Roig.

I hear there will be some familiar faces in Ricardo's mural, and I can't wait to see it unfold on the wall of the Human Rights Institute Gallery.

At Kean, we open our campus to audiences from across New Jersey and the region.

I'm thrilled that we are hosting our third annual *Jazz & Roots Music Festival* on September 23rd. This free, outdoor music festival attracts thousands of people to our campus for a day of

music, including jazz, reggae, R&B and more. I hope to see all of you there.

As an anchor institution, we also elevate the community intellectually.

Our Distinguished Lecture Series hosts lectures by thought leaders on a variety of subjects front and center in public discourse. Last year, we welcomed CNN's Dana Bash, author James McBride and physicist Dr. Michio Kaku. The distinguished lectures planned for this year will add to the growing list of luminaries who have spoken at Kean.

Speaking of events, I encourage you to save the date for Homecoming weekend, October 13th to 15th, when we welcome students, alumni, faculty, staff and friends, to campus for a weekend of sports, a carnival, alumni events and good ol' Cougar pride.

Kean has embraced a holistic, student-centered approach in recent years, focusing on diverse backgrounds, needs and aspirations. We nurture the *whole* student – their social, emotional and personal growth – along with their academic achievement and job readiness. We also promote engagement to enhance student satisfaction, retention and long-term success.

At Kean, we encourage the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, communication and interpersonal skills, all of which are vital to success in one's personal and professional life.

For example, we established partnerships with the New York Red Bulls and New York Jets. These professional teams offer exciting mentorships and career-building internships to our students – and they are doing an amazing job.

As a proud HSI, or Hispanic Serving Institution, one of the ways we focus on being student-centered is by making our programs and campus-culture welcoming and accessible to students and families who speak Spanish. You can now view our entire Kean.edu website in Spanish with the click of a button at the top of the homepage. We are also one of the first universities in the country to produce an episode of *The College Tour en Español*, which will be available on Amazon Prime.

Let's check it out.

Muy bien, right? Those students are terrific examples of the range of backgrounds and experiences that characterize our campus community, and it makes me so proud to see them find their place and Climb Higher at Kean.

For the fourth year in a row, Kean was recognized by *U.S. News & World Report* for the social mobility of our students, and for

supporting economically disadvantaged students as they work toward degree completion.

The University was also named a top public school and one of the most economically and ethnically diverse universities in the United States.

In the national landscape, Kean takes a front-line role in advocating for equity and human rights.

This past year, I had the great privilege of attending the White House's National Summit on Equal Opportunity in Higher Education; testifying at a Congressional briefing on behalf of Hispanic Colleges and Universities; and addressing the Congressional Black Caucus Annual Legislative Conference.

Together, we are doing the hard work on equity – and it starts with stepping up and speaking out, while uplifting ourselves and our campus community.

Here are some ways Kean is making a difference.

Kean is the first university in New Jersey to join the National Moon Shot for Equity initiative, a comprehensive approach to moving the needle toward closing equity gaps in higher education.

We are rethinking how we advise students based on the findings from my President's Task Force on Advising, which worked tirelessly for over a year to examine our systems and practices, and recommend improvements. Thank you to Associate Vice President Dr. Mensah Peterson for leading the charge.

The Task Force is releasing its report this Fall and we are getting to work on operationalizing their recommendations. Look out soon

for a roadmap to be shared with the entire campus community so you know what to expect throughout the transition.

As we move forward, our Advising Best Practice Team under Moon Shot for Equity will guide us under the leadership of co-chairs Dr. Stephanie Baker, executive director for CAPS (Center for Advising, Persistence and Success), and Dave Farrokh, assistant dean at the College of Business and Public Management. I have no doubt that they will help us ensure that every student receives effective advising, which we know is a key driver of student success.

We will also create a Student Bill of Rights for Advising, driven entirely by student voices, which will be posted in classrooms and prominent locations across campus. Elevating student voices will always be a priority for my administration.

We are democratizing data through initiatives like SADI – or Strategic Analytics and Data Illumination – and rethinking our structures and systems to better serve our students.

Our General Education Task Force, chaired by Professor Rachel Evans under the leadership of Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs Dr. David Birdsell, is revising our gen ed curriculum to make it more relevant to *all* learners, from first-year students to graduating seniors. We offer opportunities for making new discoveries, encountering real problems and devising actionable solutions to prepare our graduates to become the change makers and leaders in the diverse, dynamic, and challenging careers that await them. Through it all, we will continue to tailor the collegiate experience while using the Advising Bill of Rights as a guidepost.

The Holocaust Resource Center at Kean celebrated its 40th anniversary this past year. HRC works to combat antisemitism, discrimination and prejudice in all of its forms.

Our annual Human Rights Conference is in its 16th year of shedding light on human rights issues of global significance. This year, on December 8, we will celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

At Kean, we are not merely an institution that imparts knowledge; we are a catalyst for change – lasting change that uplifts and emerges from the inside.

When I stood before you and gave my first Opening Day address three years ago, I talked about three pillars that would guide our work together: safety, equity and academic excellence.

Those pillars continue to guide us today, and as we grow and change, our pillars will evolve with us.

In 2020, we rightfully focused on safety in the context of a global pandemic. The pandemic slowed us down and turned our attention to health, wellness, family time, and purpose. Our focus on safety is now naturally evolving into prioritizing well-being for everyone in our Kean community.

Leadership expert and author Simon Sinek said, "Customers will never love a company until the employees love it first."

That's why I'm excited to share that *Forbes* just ranked us as a top employer in New Jersey, which reflects our commitment to our Well-Being at Work initiative focused on physical, emotional, social, and financial health. It's great to be recognized by *Forbes*, and I'm grateful to Jennifer Peters and her team in H-R for spearheading the program. It's also getting some media attention.

Take a look.

I hope you have been energized by the wellness walks, yoga, Virgin Pulse, and especially our first-ever Employee Appreciation Day. I've really enjoyed sharing time, space, and wellness journeys with you. Our next well-being walk will take place on September 6 – that's my mother's birthday, by the way. I hope to see you there.

Well-Being at Work is one component of our comprehensive approach to wellness to ensure the success and happiness of our entire campus community.

Kean is also acting with a bold, innovative initiative that elevates the well-being of students, staff and faculty as a long-term strategic imperative. Leveraging a first-of-its-kind Vitality Index through a partnership with Ernst & Young, we will be equipped to

measure achievable progress on various aspects of employee and student wellness, and to take strategic action to build a culture of care. Our employee index is already off the ground and we're building the student index now. As EY's first university partner to utilize this technology, I am looking forward to sharing our insights at their Strategic Growth Forum in November. Be on the lookout for more information as the work moves forward and thank you to Deputy Chief of Staff Itunu Balogun for leading these efforts.

In the meantime, the Department of Athletics and Recreation has expanded recreational hours, offerings and wellness programs for the campus community. The Kean Fitness Center in the D'Angola Gym was revitalized with updated equipment, more space and longer hours to encourage students, staff and faculty to embrace wellness.

Our focus on wellness is an investment in all of you.

Take a look.

Wellness is foundational – everything good flows from there.

That's why I'm so excited to announce the creation of the Division of Integrated Health, Safety and Response Services, which will bring together our teams in the Wellness Center, Cougar Connections for Social Work, and the KUPD. Under the leadership of Acting Senior Vice President Jerome Hatfield, we will revolutionize our approach to health, wellness, and safety by embracing an innovative, research-based approach to integrating services. We also named our first Chief Well-Being Officer Erika Charles charged with enhancing the holistic and sustainable vitality of our students, faculty, and staff.

This summer we also announced a new, robust financial education program set for release this fall. The dfree@KeanUniv

program will further the regional impact and benefit students, employees and families across New Jersey. We are excited to partner with dfree Foundation and Prudential, a leading worldwide company that is breaking down barriers to financial security for under-served communities, on this important initiative.

As COVID-19 becomes endemic, we are leveraging our collective strengths to enhance emergency response, preventive health, and well-being across our campuses. Kean is building a future where safety is not just a reaction to crises but an inherent part of the fabric of the University.

Looking out for each other and uplifting one another is an essential part of who we are as a community.

The last few years have demonstrated how we are anchors for each other in times of celebration, and in times of uncertainty.

That's part of the culture we all contribute to on a daily basis as we forge ahead into an unknown yet promising future.

I often talk about ACE, my continuous improvement model through which we consistently assess, create and execute.

So while we understand and appreciate our Kean culture, it is important to me that we collectively re-examine and explicitly define our values.

On Opening Day last year, I told you we would bring together representatives from every corner of the University to take an honest look at ourselves and reimagine our mission to reflect our current priorities and vision for the University.

I'm excited to announce today that the final draft of our revised mission statement and core values are complete! Thanks to the

dedicated team of stakeholders who spent all year working on it, and to the University Planning Council for leading the charge.

Mission and value statements are vital. A strong mission statement articulates an organization's reason for existence, its primary objectives, and the value it aims to provide to all of its stakeholders.

I'm proud to say ours does all of that and more, and I'd like to share it with you now:

Kean University, New Jersey's first Urban Research University creates a **world-class, innovative and inclusive** society through equity and excellence in teaching, learning, global research, and impactful public engagement.

And here are our core values:

Academic Excellence: We strive for excellence in all aspects of academia.

Equity: We intentionally deconstruct barriers that hinder access to opportunities.

Inclusivity: We deliberately embrace the transformative power of inclusion. Our strength lies in the varied perspectives and experiences within our learning community.

Wellness: We aspire to collaboratively create a vibrant, equitable, supportive and inclusive culture of care in which all members of the Kean community feel energized, safe and empowered to thrive and engage in the campus community.

Social Mobility: We serve as a catalyst for social mobility, enabling students to transcend socioeconomic barriers and realize their full potential.

Public Impact: We embrace a core value of fostering public engagement and promoting meaningful public impact.

What do you think?

I'm glad you like them because they will inform our decisions and help formulate our goals and objectives as we move ahead.

They are a reflection of who we are and the culture we shape, together, each day.

At our next Board meeting, I will ask our Trustees to officially approve our new mission and core values for this great University.

The collective work we are doing is transformational and we will only succeed if we move forward together.

This is shared governance in action.

When I talked about embarking on this work a year ago, I also asked something of all of you: that you trust one another through the process and trust the process.

I warned that it would be hard work; things would get a little messy, and there would be impassioned debates. It was inevitable because we all care so deeply about this university.

Trust is an essential part of a healthy organization's climate. It empowers us to lean into tough conversations, challenge one another and hold one another accountable for the good of our university.

In a climate of trust, we are more likely to embrace diversity and work cohesively toward shared goals.

As management guru Peter Drucker once said, "The glue that holds all relationships together – including the relationship between the leader and the led – is trust, and trust is based on integrity."

We have proven our integrity.

This is our moment to further cultivate and nurture trust in our interactions, collaborations and endeavors. It will enable us to innovate, to take calculated risks, and to move forward with confidence – as an urban research university; as an anchor institution; and as we dedicate ourselves to pushing boundaries and contributing to meaningful, sustainable change for our students, our society, and our Kean family.

To accomplish all we've set out to do, we need the right team.

Over the last three years, we have welcomed more than one hundred new tenure-track faculty members to our campus community!

This year we are welcoming 27 more tenure-track faculty to Kean, including a new cohort of Equity in Action Presidential Fellows, across a wide range of disciplines. These are promising researchers, clinicians, and educators with unique life experiences that reflect the rich diversity of the Kean community.

Two new deans also join Kean this Fall. Dr. Jessica Thurlow is leading the College of Liberal Arts and Dr. Jim Konopack is at the helm of the College of Health Professions and Human Services. They, along with many others across campus, will help solidify our academic reorganization plan that takes full effect this semester. I also want to send a special welcome to Dr. Sue Porterfield, who is our new vice president of research. Sue's new position leading and coordinating our research endeavors is an absolutely

essential role as we scale up our place in the research arena, and we couldn't be happier to have her on board.

Where are our new faculty and administrators? Please stand up so we can welcome you.

We're so glad you're here, and look forward to the many ways you will enhance learning opportunities for our students and enrich our University community.

Our evolution has been profound but one thing remains constant – the culture we inherited and cultivated together, the core of who we are as a university community, will never falter.

We are a community that steps up and steps forward.

That's who we are.

We support each other.

We lift each other up.

And we hold each other accountable.

We anchor each other.

We now stand at the threshold of a new era, marked by growth, innovation and equity.

This new academic year is a pivotal one. Our trajectory forward is clear, and the path ahead can best be illuminated by the brilliance of our collective efforts. We must embark together in a spirit of unity, collaboration and innovation. Our progress requires each of us to contribute our best, leveraging our strengths to fortify our shared vision.

So, I pose a new challenge to each one of us this year: Take purposeful actions to elevate yourselves, our community and our University to the next level as a national center of excellence in

research, as an anchor institution, as a beacon of support for our students.

I trust you will each contribute to help Kean University to live our mission; adhere to our deeply rooted core values; educate and prepare our students for successful careers; and advance our work in research, and in programs and initiatives that strengthen our community.

We have a lot of work ahead of us, but together, we will continue to break new ground.

I'd like to ask our board members, my Cabinet team, our deans, our labor leaders and our government leaders to join me now here on stage.

(GIVE EVERYONE A CHANCE TO GET UP THERE...)

We are exactly where we need to be. We are on the precipice of remarkable greatness, and we're going to show the world what the path ahead – the path of ascension – looks like.

We are going to show the world that Kean Cougars Climb Higher.

So I say to all.....Happy New Year, Kean University family, and thank you for being here.