Hello and welcome,

First, let me say congratulations on getting through this semester and the academic year. This time next week we will have closed out the 2020-2021 school year with our drive through commencement ceremony and nearly 250 students participating. And thank you for making the time to be here today, whether you are actually here or viewing this through the recorded message. And just so we are all on the same page, the reason we are in webinar is that we invited so many people to the party that we didn’t want to break Zoom.

The reason I have asked us to gather is because over the last few weeks I have started feeling this kind of emptiness or void. I have worked in higher education for more than 30 years and so I have experienced many ends of the year. Traditionally they end with the celebration of commencement. Then the students and faculty leave and we classified professionals and administrators start to retool for the next year. But this year is different for me. I don’t know if it is because it is my first as a president, so the role is new. I know that on May 24 I will begin to retool as I always do. Begin to think about how I can be better next year. Begin to think about how we can be better next year.

But in my reflections, I realized that my first real introduction to all of you was at the Fall State of the College. And even on that day you saw me, but I didn’t see you. And truly, that feels forever ago. It’s been 312 days since I stepped foot on onto the Ohlone campus in this role. As we prepare for commencement next week, the energy and excitement has been palpable, even in this socially distant environment. I have seen students and their families on campus in their regalia taking graduation photographs. And I know it is that special time of year. If you have gotten to know one thing about me you know that Commencement is my absolute favorite day of the year. I have had sucky days and the moment I arrive at the venue the sun comes out, even if just inside, and the world brightens. It is the day for which we expend our energy.

But the other reality is that as this year ends, I felt like I needed to put some closure on it. Having the sense that it was going to fade into nothingness without recognizing each other. Maybe it’s the virtual setting that drives that emptiness feeling. Traditionally at the end of classes or the end of commencement I imagine there are rounds of handshakes and hugs and well wishes. And just like the rest of this year when we would normally have had chit chat to continue our community in between meetings or in parking lots or as we are walking together, we just click “Leave Meeting,” and poof, everyone is gone. That’s how I felt this year might come to a close, one big End Meeting click. At the end, we will have the opportunity to have a question and answer time or just a time for comment or well wishes and such. But I just kept having the feeling that I couldn’t let you, let us, move into the summer without us gathering to say Thank You and Congratulations.
Thank you for welcoming me as your president and being open to me being my authentic self. Thank you for your acceptance of my ideas and my push to make us the institution we all want to be. I have felt at home since arriving, even during the times I have sat alone on campus.

As we venture into our respective summer rituals, I propose that however we reset and refresh ourselves, we recommit to ensuring that we SEE our students. And we see them not just with our eyes, but that see who they are so we can be with them. I want to tell you about one our students whom I have met this year. Her name is Isis. She is an excellent student in the classroom, and in non-pandemic times active on campus. Isis on the surface is outgoing, capable and energetic. But this last year Isis has been isolated, learning from her home with her younger siblings, and front-line working parents. Isis is one of our success stories. Great grades, ready to transfer, accepted to five or six institutions. But Isis is not OK. She is sharing her house in crowded quarters with three generations of family. The opportunities for alone time are scarce. We were able to provide her, like so many of our students, with Wi-Fi service so that her connections to us were more stable as there could be four to seven people vying for the same internet connection at the same time.

But inside Isis is struggling and collapsing. She is stressed about her grades and coping. She is in and out of depression like symptoms. Not only is she worried about her grades; she is worrying about the finances of her family. Did I mention that she is the oldest child? Adding additional responsibilities. She is worried about her parents catching Covid. Not just because of the implications of the impact on their health, but also because of what that may do to their finances. She has decided that she cannot transfer, and instead must stay at home and get a job. The sadness and yet resignation to her fate are distinguishable in her voice. Even as I try to convince her that all is not decided, you can hear that sound. It’s a sound that cuts into the soul. It’s a sound that is counter to everything we tell students and everything for which we work.

But it is a sound that transmits into me and fuels the determination to be better; to better serve students; to better serve our community; to better serve our faculty and staff to ensure they are equipped to make the difference we claim to make. It is critical that we see our students. That we look past the smile, or the pain and that we see them where they are. That’s how we make a difference. I believe that is who Ohlone is and is meant to be. We cannot be those people who become transactional rather than relational.

What has made the pandemic worse for us is that our campus, our world, is for so many of our students THEIR SAFE PLACE. It is the place they come not only to give themselves a shot at a better future for themselves and their families, but to escape the realities in which they must live. And I think we would be naïve if we didn’t also think that this place is a refuge for some of our faculty and staff. This place, a place we want to create community, maybe the safe haven for our peers and brethren. We have to SEE each other as well.

But even through all of that, we have done incredible things this last year. I had the pleasure of entering as your president in a pandemic, which required me to make my introduction to you through Zoom. I remember looking down and seeing something like 259 participants in my campus forum last March. And guess what, we persevered, survived and excelled. I stepped in under the cloud of economic uncertainty. We have worked to remain viable and strong. Not only that, we have worked to be ready to emerge in a place of strength economically. We have work to do and long-term choices and decisions to make, but we have weathered that to this point. We are still here and standing.
As important, I join a distinct few who entered their presidencies under the shadow of the call for social justice and racial reform. But I walked onto campus to banners reading Ohlone College: Unity in Diversity. That resonated with me. It helped calm my nervousness that I was coming to the right place. And I have worked to unapologetically create systemic change in the name of equity and serving our students and ourselves. I will continue to argue that we are in the midst of a system that talks about equity, but one that has built rules, regulations, customs and cultures contrary to that mission. The work has to be intentional, and you have walked with me on this venture. We have work to do, but we are laying the tools before us to do the work.

If we stop to reflect on this last year we have shown that we have the capacity to implement change when we want and/or need to. We have changed the way we teach and we have changed the way we learn. We have changed the way we do business. Things we said once upon a time we could not do, we suddenly have created mechanisms to implement and be efficient at them. We have changed the way we gather and the way we create community. There in no substitute for human contact and interaction. But lest we remember that not every person is comfortable or at their best in personal crowds. We have to learn to coexist between the face-to-face and technological worlds so we see everyone in their best light. As we transition back to the new way of being in person, we must also accept that there are some spaces and places where we cannot, should not and will not return to normal. And many of those may be for our own good. But that doesn’t mean the transformation will always be comfortable.

The reflections on this year remind of us of the infinity of human capacity when working collaboratively and together. When I arrived, I was met with concerns of cultures of oppression, retribution, retaliation and lack of empowerment. Humility and realism prevent me from saying that those have ended or even been changed. But I hope this last year I have worked at allowing people to feel safe in their own skin, and safer with their colleagues. If I haven’t, I am working on it. I started with an air of distrust between constituent groups. I hope that I have shown a willingness to build the capacity for greater trust and positive relationships. Again, we must recognize and acknowledge that there is work to do and we must each commit to doing our part in that work.

As we conclude the year I think we know this has not been a normal year, and yet we pushed through. We have spent the last week celebrating our students and our accomplishments. But as we have a conclude the year we have so much to celebrate and recognize:

Peaceful Protests
Student Forums with the President
Faculty Forums with the President
Classified Professional Forums with the President
Family Meetings
Zoom VIP Centers for Students
Student Study Centers
The Return of Student Athletes
Student Dance Programs
Student Theater Productions
We Belong Week
Week of Welcome
Drs. Frank Harris, III & J. Luke Wood
A2Mend Webinars
Dr. Joy DeGruy
Dr. Bertice Berry
Return to Campus Committee
Black Minds Matter Webinar Series
EmbRace Against Hate
Dr. Regina Stanback Stroud
Mindful Meditations
Lytton Center Presentations
ODIAC Equity Series
Guided Pathways Implementation
Umoja
Puente
Mecha
ASOC
IEPI-PRT Teams x three
Ohlone Local DEI Strategy

We gather today to just take a moment and remember that as we head into our summer rituals, that we pause, reflect, retool, regroup, rebuild and get ready to become a serving institution. I thank you for allowing me to be your president and to serve and lead you. It’s an honor to be at Ohlone College and I do so standing tall and proud. I would now like to present some images of the year we have shared together. These are not everything we have done, but a small representation.

VIDEO
That song is one that lifts me up.

C is for the courage we possess

H is for the hurt we have endured for the honor of serving as we do
A is for the attitude working through patience
M is for motivation
P is for the perseverance we have shown
I is for the Integrity we have
O is for remaining optimistic
N is necessary because we are never giving up.

We end this year as invincible; as unbreakable; as unstoppable; as unshakeable; because we are Champions.

Thank you for joining me today.