

Newspaper column
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Dr. John Jasinski, Northwest Missouri State University president

We have vibrance and life returning to the Northwest Missouri State University campus this week as students are returning to Maryville and we begin the 2021-22 academic year. We are so thankful for the roles each and every one of you play to carry out our mission and show Bearcat pride.

Northwest is positioned for a strong and successful 2021-22 because, as I've explained to many groups in recent months, we are the little engine that does. We have had so much to celebrate during the last year – from ribbon cuttings, to individual and team awards, athletic victories and milestones – while we keep an eye toward the future and think about the tracks ahead of us.

The new academic year arrives on the heels of a history-making day to end July that included the opening of our Agricultural Learning Center at the R.T. Wright Farm. That project is the culmination of a shared goal to enhance student learning across disciplines while enhancing opportunities in our region for producers, consumers and so many others. It is another significant public-private partnership, and we are so thankful for the state's support, including that of Rep. Allen Andrews and Sen. Dan Hegeman, as well as a visit Monday and thumbs-up from Sen. Roy Blunt and his team.

July 30 also saw the end of our Forever Green fundraising campaign, a transformational effort by our Northwest community that raised more than \$55 million for academic initiatives, scholarships, student life and other needs at Northwest – the Carl and Cheryl Hughes Fieldhouse, which we opened in 2018 as the largest public-private partnership in the region's history, being another significant outcome of that campaign.

Throughout the campaign and as we embark on a new academic year, we are aligned with our strategic plan. With our strategic themes as guideposts, we will be intentional in addressing opportunities and executing our plan. We will address flexible excellence, people excellence, operational excellence and COVID-19.

One of the ways we're doing that is through our embrace of an inclusive excellence framework. We are addressing and enhancing a more diverse and equitable Northwest. We are developing and enhancing partnerships that create a more welcoming environment for all who enter our community.

The excellence modeled by our faculty and staff is another reason Northwest is successful. During our All-Employee Meeting last week, we celebrated this fall's Faculty Excellence Award recipients – Dr. Ajay Bandi and Dr. Kurt Haberyan for scholarship, Dr. Karen Britt and Dr. Matt Symonds for service, and Dr. Casey Abington and Dr. Brett Chloupek for teaching. Each year, Northwest selects one of the Faculty Excellence Award for Teaching recipients as its Governor's Award for Excellence in Education recipient, and that recipient for 2022 is Dr. Abington for not only her excellence in teaching but her focus on student success.

Additionally, the International Association of Laboratory Schools has recognized our Horace Mann Laboratory School and the Phyllis and Richard Leet Center for Families and Children as an outstanding laboratory school. This is yet another tribute and important recognition to one of Northwest's hallmark programs and its people.

Further, as a tribute to the work all of us do every day, we are projecting a record enrollment this fall of around 7,900 students. We also project achieving our second highest-ever retention rate and a graduation rate that is up by 2 percent – the highest at Northwest in more than two decades.

As an institution and individually, we've gone through a lot during the past year and since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. There is no doubt more challenges lie ahead, but we hold close to what it means to be a Bearcat. Bearcats learn, connect, care, practice civility and show pride. No matter our roles at the University or in our community, we continue to learn and hone our craft. We connect with each other and uplift each other. We care for each other by saying hello, opening doors, uplifting and assisting. We practice civility by respecting others and focusing on inclusivity. And we show pride by spreading our Bearcat love and supporting Northwest.

As Bearcats, there is no better time for us to be bold and think about the future of our University. We're in a position of strength today but remain flexible and agile. We can further separate Northwest from our higher education peers by working together and executing on our strategic goals.

Dr. John Jasinski is the 10th president of Northwest Missouri State University. For news and events at Northwest, visit www.nwmissouri.edu.