

Newspaper column
Thursday, Jan. 20, 2022
Dr. John Jasinski, Northwest Missouri State University president

Happy new year! It is always a good feeling to welcome our students back to campus after a break and begin a new semester at Northwest Missouri State. As we turn our calendars to a new year, it is clear that obstacles lie ahead – but that those obstacles may be disguised as opportunities we can transform into green lights.

First and foremost, COVID-19 is here and it will continue. The Northwest Leadership Team has committed to reconceptualizing how the University addresses the pandemic so it is part of our daily operations. In fact, our guideposts since COVID's arrival in spring 2020 – learning and success, health and safety, agility, and viability – are subsumed within our campus and community resources, many of which were not part of our toolkit before the pandemic.

While COVID-19 has presented many obstacles to institutions of higher ed and our society, it has indeed led us to opportunities. We've become more agile as an organization through our collective work in responding to the pandemic. Simultaneously, staying focused on adaptation will keep us moving forward.

Our enrollment presents some obstacles, but we also see opportunities in that area. We are extremely proud to be a leader in the state in terms of increasing enrollment during the last five years – and we achieved an all-time record high enrollment of 8,022 students by the end of the fall semester. That is not by luck but because we have been strategic, using environmental scans and understanding years ago that we needed to diversify our enrollment.

We've increased our graduation rate by 2 percent, and we are seeing the lowest percentage of students on probation at Northwest in the last two decades. That tells us our students want to be in school, they are engaged, and the collective work of our faculty, staff and community is significant.

Yet, there's a lot at play in the enrollment market. We cannot rest on our laurels. We have to keep going. And as we say: everyone is a recruiter, everyone is a retainer. It takes all of us to address enrollment, engage with the visiting families we see on our sidewalks and advocate for the quality, comprehensive education Northwest offers.

This also is the time of the year when we begin to get a sense of what's happening legislatively and with our budget for the upcoming fiscal year. Northwest's guiding principles in terms of its budget are clear and founded in our strategic plan process.

We are projecting appropriations increases and investments from the state, and I can't recall saying that often in my 13 years as president of Northwest. But even with those monies, please understand the mandatory increases in front of us – such as healthcare and retirement – will be significant and likely will offset any increases we might receive from the state. Further, we're going to do what we can to ensure all of our employees are receiving a

minimum wage of at least \$15 an hour as Gov. Mike Parson has suggested for all state employees.

In addition, we know we have capital investments we must focus on to maintain operations. Our Central Plant, for example, is antiquated. We're so thankful for the vision and work of our founders in 1905 and the innovation of former president B.D. Owens during the late 1970s and many others after him to launch our alternative fuels program. We know our residence halls, Martindale Hall and Brown Hall need attention as well.

The Northwest Leadership Team is taking all of this into consideration and will work with a variety of leadership groups this spring to present a budget that moves Northwest forward. Our faculty and staff have worked so incredibly hard to raise Northwest's performance higher than our peers. Northwest has focused on affordability and is the most efficient institution in the state. We need everyone's support to further strengthen Northwest Missouri State University.

Earlier this month during Northwest's All-Employee Meeting, I referenced Matthew McConaughey's book, "Greenlights," and I asked our employees: What are your green lights? What are Northwest's green lights? As we begin 2022, I challenge all of us to acknowledge and celebrate green lights. Be headlights on our campus, in our community and in our society!

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