Welcome Back Address – August 2016
Bill Destler

First of all, welcome back to another academic year at RIT! For most of us, this moment when the campus comes alive with students again is an exhilarating time that reminds us that, for all the varied ways in which we serve our community and the world, our primary responsibility always has been and always will be to our students.

The past year has been another year of growth at RIT, both in size and stature. After welcoming the largest freshman class in our history, overall enrollment grew to 18,700, placing RIT among the ten largest private colleges and universities in terms of undergraduate enrollment. This year’s freshman class will be intentionally smaller to alleviate some overcrowding situations we had last year in both housing and academic classes.

New construction this year will include a new housing unit in Global Village to help alleviate the current student housing shortage and the start of work on the Magic Spell Studios facility to support the Magic Center and our gaming and film and animation programs.

There were simply too many highlights last year to mention them all, but a few were truly exceptional. Over the last decade, our Astrophysics faculty has done theoretical work and numerical simulations based on Einstein’s General Theory of Relativity in an attempt to predict the gravity waves that Einstein’s theory said should be emitted by two black holes as they merge together into one. Their predictions were verified by the first detection of gravity waves by the LIGO experiment, in which other RIT faculty were also involved. It is important to note that, absent this work done by RIT faculty and their
international colleagues, the signals detected by the LIGO facility would remain a mystery as to their origin.

Research funding at RIT grew last year to a record $73M, and RIT can now boast of a State funded Center of Excellence in Sustainable Manufacturing and a Center for Advanced Technology in Additive Manufacturing. RIT is also a partner on 5 of the 8 National Network for Manufacturing Innovation centers established by President Obama to increase America’s ability to compete in this crucial economic sector. To my knowledge, no other university comes close.

Our students continue to compete at the highest levels nationally and internationally. This year a group of RIT students won the State Department’s P2P: Challenging Extremism international competition for university students to find ways to use social media to combat terrorism. Our Mini-Baja team finished first and second in the two major national competitions this year, and an all-female team of RIT engineering students competed in the Formula Hybrid competition that took place in May at the New Hampshire Motor Speedway, and finished third in the electric category.

Our faculty and staff continue to garner awards as well. Over the last three years, seven of our young faculty have been awarded NSF CAREER Awards, a number comparable to many R1 research universities. And I want the faculty and staff to know how much I appreciate their hard work in accommodating last year’s enrollment surge. We will continue to look at ways in which our limited resources can be better allocated to support those programs that are seeing dramatic increases in enrollment.

And last year we welcomed several new deans including Anne Haake, Doreen Edwards and Twyla Cummings, bringing the number of female deans at RIT to six – a majority!
Our athletic teams succeeded on and off the playing field. Our women’s basketball team and our men’s lacrosse team had wonderfully successful seasons last year, and our men’s hockey team won the Atlantic Hockey Tournament Championship and advanced to the NCAA national championship tournament for the second year in a row. Unfortunately, however, our students met my challenge to fill the Polisseni Center for the game against Colgate, so I had to dye my hair orange again.

Just a few weeks ago, RIT Board of Trustees Chair, Chris Whitman, led a delegation of almost 100 Trustees, RIT faculty and staff, administrators, and alumni into the heart of Silicon Valley to connect with alumni and companies in the region. Teams of RIT representatives visited 24 companies in one day to spread the word about the emergence of RIT as a leading technological university, and two alumni events drew about 600 attendees. Now we must ensure that we follow up on the opportunities for support and partnerships that emerged from this remarkably successful venture. Helping us to do just that will be John Trierweiler, our new Chief Marketing Officer. John, would you stand and be recognized?

In support of that effort, we produced a new RIT marketing video which was shown at all of the alumni events and corporate visits on the trip, and which we will use over the next year or so in support of our fundraising efforts and our work to implement our new strategic plan. Let’s take a look at that video now, which was produced by Partners & Napier, University News and Production Services.

VIDEO
Finally, I want to mention the elephant in the room. As you know, I have announced that I will step down as your President in the Summer of 2017 after 10 years in this role, and for the support and encouragement that all of you have offered to Rebecca and me during this period we can only offer our heartfelt thanks. We are, of course, proud of what has been accomplished during this decade, but mostly we are proud of you. The efforts of all of you to improve the experience that RIT students receive during their tenure here simply amaze us. The work that so many of you have done to turn a half-baked idea like Imagine RIT into a veritable showcase of what this remarkable university is all about is something we will never forget. And the commitment of all of you to ensuring that RIT remains an inclusive and welcoming community for all makes us so proud to have our names associated with this wonderful place.

We have no interest in getting involved in the search for RIT’s next President, but I hope that as the search progresses, the process will be guided by our shared values in assessing candidates. Our love of geeks, artists and humanists, and our belief in the possibilities that can grow out of a greater connection between them, is one such value. Our commitment to students who are deaf and hard-of-hearing and our appreciation for the unique diversity they bring to our campus is another. Our efforts to build an elite university without becoming elitist and our associated commitment to maintaining access to RIT for those from economically and socially challenged backgrounds must not be forgotten in this process. And finally, our commitment to provide a rigorous, intellectually challenging, education for our students that will ensure them a promising future must be maintained.

Because we are healthy financially and growing in both enrollment and reputation, I am sure that RIT will find many strong candidates interested in the Presidency here, and I hope that all of you will
participate in the listening sessions currently scheduled and help further define the values that we hope will drive the search process. During the next year, however, I would ask that you also continue to work with Rebecca and me to advance RIT’s strategic plan and our ongoing fundraising campaign. The field of higher education is an increasingly competitive one, and institutions that stand still for a period will almost certainly lose ground to their peer institutions. We do not intend to “coast” through the next year, and we hope that you will continue to work with us to keep RIT on its remarkably positive trajectory.

One final word: My tenure at RIT has been truly a partnership with Rebecca. Her contributions to our sustainability efforts and her many connections with students across the University, and especially with students of color, have helped to put a human face on this place and to reassure all within our community that their voices can be heard. She has been active in the greater Rochester community and has played a major role in the Rochester City Scholars Program. But more importantly, at least to me, she has been my partner, my friend, my love, my counselor, and my strongest supporter. I don’t know how to adequately say thanks to her, but I hope this feeble attempt will do until I find a way to say it better. I love you, Becca.

And I love all of you, too, but in a different way. 😊