



INAUGURAL ADDRESS

BY

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Hello everyone! And, Hello Fredonia! For all our guests, welcome to the State University of New York at Fredonia.

Let me begin by thanking our sign language interpreter, Janelle Krueger. Thank you.

There are moments in life when you wish for some things no matter how impossible they may be. As I stand here at this moment I wish my mother, the late Korpo Kehen Kolison and my father, the Late Hon. Stephen Hama Kolison, Sr. were both here today. All I am, and all that I will achieve are



because I had parents who loved me and inspired me. I am so grateful for the love and inspiration that I experienced from them.

To all the speakers here today, Trustee Eunice A. Lewin of the Board of Trustees for the State University of New York, Honorable Frank A. Pagano, Chair of the Fredonia College Council, Senator George M. Borrello, of the New York State Senate, Dr. Greg Gibbs, President, Fredonia Alumni Association Board of Directors, Mr. Joseph C. Falcone, Chair of the Board of Directors of the Fredonia College Foundation, Mr. Daniel Heitzenrater, President and CEO of the Chautauqua County Chamber of Commerce, Dr. Donato J. Tramuto, our keynote speaker, Mr. Nathan P. Kropp, Director of the Fredonia Newman Center, Dr. Rob Deemer, Professor of Composition, Ms. Ilene Thompson, President of the Student Association, Ms. France Souneka Charles, student reflection speaker, my dear sister, Esther Lusu Kolison, The Rev. Wheigar J. Bright, and Dr. Tracy Stenger, our Presiding Official, thank you so much for the kind words and making this day very special. Thank you for being here.



I want to thank our musicians, Dr. Tiffany Nicely, who led the African Drumming Ensemble, Dr. Ji Hyun Woo, our organist, the Fredonia Wind Ensemble directed by Dr. Donna Dolson, Mr. Patrick Connolly for singing the National Anthem, The Fredonia Chamber Choir, directed by Dr. Vernon Huff, and the Faculty/Student Jazz Quartet, directed by Dr. Nick Weiser. Let's give them a hand.

Students, I am thrilled that you have chosen to be here today to celebrate this long-standing tradition. Investiture ceremonies for Presidents do not occur very often. As a result, many students do not experience investiture ceremonies while they are enrolled in college. Thank you for being here.

To the faculty, staff, emeriti faculty and staff, and alumni of this great institution, thank you for your kind support.

To the College Council, members of the search committee, and the Search Firm Stobeck & Pimental, thank you for recommending me for this



position. To the Trustees and Former Chancellor Kristina Johnson, thank you for offering me this tremendous opportunity.

I want to acknowledge my fellow presidents here today, delegates, colleagues, special guests, and friends who travelled from far and wide to make this a very special day. Thank you for being so kind to grace this ceremony with your presence.

To the inaugural committee co-chaired by Dr. Robert Strauss and Ms. Teresa Adams, and everyone who worked hard to make this happen, I am grateful to you. You all have done an excellent job within a short time and with a very a small budget. Thank you.

We work hard to fund this ceremony without using state funds. So, I am very thankful to all our partners who contributed to this event. Many of them are present here this afternoon. Thanks to the Fredonia College Foundation and the Faculty and Staff Association for their support. Please join me in expressing thanks to all our partners and supporters for their financial support for this event. Let's applaud them.



I want to recognize all civic and business leaders here today. Your support to this institution is indispensable. Thank you for being here today.

To my cabinet and staff, thank you for your support and for being here. I am grateful for being able to depend on you during this journey.

I want to recognize my predecessor, Dr. Virginia S. Horvath who served this institution as president for 7 years and as provost for 7 years. Thank you for being here today, Ginny.

To all my friends who are here and those watching online, and to all my professors and teachers who I had the opportunity to learn from, and to all the people who are watching the ceremony back in Liberia, especially my siblings and relatives, my beloved niece in South Africa, and to everyone who is listening, thank you for this honor. I am humbled and deeply moved emotionally by this. Thank you all very much.



Please indulge me as I introduce some very special people in my life. I would like to introduce my beautiful wife, the first lady of this institution, Valeria Rose Kolison. For more than 28 years, she has been there with me whether I was swimming in calm waters or in stormy seas.

My children are here. They mean so much to me – my daughter Ophelia Korpo Kolison; my son Stephen Hama Kolison, III; and my son Samuel Kortu Hama Kolison.

Three of my sisters are here: Esther L. Kolison, Frances Kolison Bright, and Beatrice Kolison Barson. One of my wife’s sisters, Ms. Shannon Purnell Lawrence is here, my brother-in-law, the Rev. W. Bright and my brother-in-law Mr. Ceth Barson are here. They are here with their relatives and members of their families. Please stand family and be recognized.

Trustee Lewin, due to COVID, we are arriving to the investiture two years later. In a way, the delay may not have been a bad thing. It gave me the opportunity to learn more about my institution and my institution learning more about me. During this time, I have learned more about the



opportunities we have and the challenges we face as higher education and as an institution.

We are aware of the demographic changes. We have heard about the declining number of high school graduates heading directly to college. Concerns about the cost and the value of a college education keeps getting louder. We are seeing challenges in attracting talent while an increasing number of highly talented people are choosing to retire. If you are following closely, you might say to yourself that Kolison just presented the case to question the reason behind why anyone would want to be a college president these days. Let me provide you my reason later.

The biggest challenge we face here at Fredonia has to do with declining enrollment. Of course, that is impacting a number of other variables that adds to our main challenge. I will talk about opportunities we have that I believe will address our challenges.

In terms of opportunities, we have many. In fact, I will say that our opportunities far outweigh our challenges. It is based on one of these



opportunities that we have set the theme of this investiture to be “Enhancing Access to and Persistence at the well of learning, discovery and success”. I will speak about this theme shortly. But, first let me tell you a little about this great institution.

This institution began in 1826 when the residents of Fredonia, N.Y. established a form of higher education beyond what was called the "common school". They called it the Fredonia Academy. Before long, the academy distinguished itself as a regional center for teacher-training. The Academy evolved to many stages in its advancement. In 1948 it became SUNY College at Fredonia. Today, this institution is a major regional comprehensive university educating students from throughout this country and many parts of the world. We have about 80 degree programs, among them are some of the best programs you will find anywhere in America. To cite just a few examples, our music program is among the best anywhere producing Grammy nominees and winners; you can find graduates of our program in theater on Broadway; graduates of our education programs can be found training young minds throughout this state and beyond, our communication disorders program is transforming lives including working



with scores of people to improve their speech and hearing. Our science corridor can rival any science center that you will find at any national or flagship university. In fact, just about two weeks ago, several of our faculty members were awarded about \$335,000 by the National Science Foundation to purchase a Scanning Electron Microscope, thus increasing our research capacity. If you are not in a hurry to leave this afternoon, please take a tour of the campus.

This place is outstanding, powered by dedicated faculty and staff and our outstanding student body. During the last 10 years, more than 150 million dollars has been invested at this university to improve our infrastructure, and during the next five years, another \$40 million dollars will be spent to improve our facilities. We are grateful to the capital project funds from New York State for making these things happen at Fredonia. We are a major economic anchor in this region.

This is a wonderful institution that has been blessed with outstanding past leaders upon whose shoulders I stand today. Their names are inscribed on this chain that I wear. Our students are among the best students that can



be found anywhere. I was impressed by their resilience and their cooperative spirits during the height of the pandemic. No matter how many restrictions we threw at them, they rose to the occasion.

There are many things about Fredonia that call for celebration. Time is limited and so I will not be able to discuss all of them.

The word I want us to keep in mind is “relevance”. Sustaining and enhancing one’s relevance is, in my opinion, the key to success in this new era. Relevance, in my view has to do with whether what one, as an institution, is doing is in alignment with what society wants and needs.

This fall and early into next spring, we will develop a strategic plan and an academic master plan for this university. I cannot think of a better time than now to do this given that we are emerging from COVID, which disrupted everything. These plans will be about our future and the place we intend to secure for Fredonia in this rapidly changing world. As we develop this plan, there are things that I believe we must consider for our relevance. Let me tell you a short story.



When I was a young lad, between the ages of 6 and 10, my parents would take us up into the hinterlands of Liberia where my father had a farm. He grew coffee, cacao, oranges, grapefruit and oil palm. Our trip there often coincided with harvest time. I remember my dad saying to my sister Esther and me that any amount of coffee we harvested belonged to us. We could dry it and sell it and keep the money to buy anything we wanted. There were few houses nearby. No one in the area had pipe bound water. It was rural. You had to collect water from a well or from the small river. There was a school teacher in this small community who had a beautiful well. The well was surrounded by palm trees and the water was clean and cold. He was a kind man. This was a man with compassion. He was called Teacher Morris.

Teacher Morris invited his neighbors, including us, to draw water from his well. And so each morning and each evening, families would go to Teacher Morris' well to draw water. The well did not just provide water for drinking, cooking, bathing, and other uses, it brought people together. It connected people. Families got to know each other better and supported each other. It meant so much for the families who drew water from it each



day. It added value to the quality of life for the homes that relied on it. Teacher Morris in my view was a hero. He provided something that was needed and in high demand. I often think about that experience although it was years ago.

Here in Fredonia, we have a well. I call it a well of learning, discovery and success. We know what drinking from this well does for the students that are able to attend. It transforms their lives. It inspires them to become skilled, connected, creative, and responsible global citizens. They go out into the world and help to change it for the better.

What excites me about this place - what gets me up every morning and inspires me to come to this campus and work hard? It has to do with the students we educate.

We educate students from a diverse social economic background. About 40% of them come from financially challenged backgrounds. Then about 20% of our students are first generation students or students who are the



first in their families to attend college. And 20% of our students identify as a student of color.

When 40% percent of your students are in serious need of financial assistance in order to attend and persist at the well, is this a challenge or an opportunity? Think about that for a moment:

think about what happens to students after successfully drinking from this well;

think about how barriers to social mobility are removed;

think about it in terms of how this country can sustain its status as a super advanced country by educating more people whether they are from financially challenged backgrounds or not.

Given these potential impacts, then, I think having that large number of students coming from financially challenge backgrounds can or should be seen as an opportunity. If so, then I think you will agree that we should enhance access to and persistence at this well.

So, in our planning for the future, a future where our relevance is in alignment with what society needs and demands, I believe that we should aspire to enhance access to and persistence at this well of learning,



discovery, and success for all students, especially students from challenged financial backgrounds and first-generation students.

Last fall, we worked with the Fredonia College Foundation to establish the bicentennial fund. The goal for this fund is to strengthen our capacity to enhance access and persistence here at Fredonia for students.

You heard the powerful reflection from student France Souneka Charles a few minutes ago about what this institution has done for her. I am proud that we educate students like her. I am proud of all our students for seeing the value in higher education. I want to thank everyone who has already contributed to this fund, and many thanks to those who will be doing so soon.

Here are other things that I think our planning for the future should include:

1. Emphasizing the wellness of our students – we must do all we can to address mental health and other wellness needs;



2. Remaining true to our liberal arts heritage and interweaving it with experiences and learning opportunities demanded by students and parents;
3. Remaining a vibrant comprehensive university while divesting from programs that no longer hold promise for our future, and achieving high distinction in selected areas, especially in areas of high demand;
4. Taking everything that we learned during the COVID era and expanding the boundary of the university to serve adult or non-traditional students that are place bound. Our recent announcement of the JCC Fredonia BOLD program is a step in that direction;
5. Leveraging technology to enhance business efficiency and minimizing operational cost;
6. Enhancing our diversity and inclusion efforts. The world is changing rapidly before our eyes. Institutions that embrace diversity and work hard for it will retain their relevance and will be the institutions of the



future. Let me also point out that it is not enough to have a more diverse student body. What is also important is ensuring equity in outcomes across all groups of students;

7. Enhancing belongingness. Every student, faculty, and staff that comes to Fredonia should feel that they belong here.

Fredonia, the years to come will be more competitive in higher education: Competition for students; competition for talent; competition for resources and; competition for great ideas. We don't often talk about competition in higher education. Even though we do compete. It seems uncomfortable to talk about it, and maybe even impolite to talk about it. As we plan for a future where our relevance is secured, we must be more anticipatory, more agile, and swifter in how we go about our business.

The people of this Village, about 196 years ago saw opportunities when they assembled their resources to establish the Fredonia Academy. As we approach our 200th anniversary, I see opportunities to build on the accomplishments of all our predecessors. We are a great university and an



important part of a tremendous system of higher education – the SUNY System.

Fredonia, if you have been questioning my judgement to want to serve as your president in today's higher education environment, please know that I have no hesitation about wanting to work with you notwithstanding our current situation. I believe in you and the work we do here – we are transforming lives for the better. The opportunities we have today far outweigh the challenges in my assessment.

And so, Trustee Lewin, the College Council, and the Board of Trustees, and faculty, staff, and students, I, Dr. Stephen H. Kolison, Jr., publicly and enthusiastically accept the role as president, the 14th President of the State University of New York at Fredonia. So help me God.

Thank you. May God bless you, and may God bless SUNY Fredonia.