The Inauguration of President Chris Cassirer
Northwestern Health Sciences University
November 21, 2014
Inauguration address

Thank you, Dr. Peterson. Welcome to our students and family members, alumni, faculty, distinguished guests, and other supporters of Northwestern Health Sciences University. I am honored and humbled to be joining such a wonderful community of people who are so committed to student success and excellent patient care.

The more time I spend immersed in learning about our University and meeting members of our broad and accomplished community, the more certain I am that I have not just found an important leadership role, I have found a new home.

On a personal note in just 4 months (and I say this without reservation and without a pause), I love it here. I am truly excited about the power and the potential of our University to lead and create change in how we think about providing an excellent academic and clinical experience for our students and how we have an important solution for delivering very cost-effective, high quality, non-invasive patient care that can reach the broadest number of people not just here in the U.S. but around the globe.

As Dr. Peterson mentioned, our mission is to serve the next generation of professionals and leaders to become vital contributors to the delivery and advancement of healthcare.

My vision, our vision, the vision that we will pursue together is to advance a broad array of programs and clinical services that embrace a philosophy of health and wellness to achieve our mission. At a minimum, while we are often regarded as Complementary and Alternative Medicine, or CAM, we actually must seek to eliminate the words “complementary” and “alternative” from our lexicon. Whether it is chiropractic, acupuncture, Chinese medicine or massage therapy, the evidence is continuing to build that these should not be alternatives at all but rather simply, yet profoundly, an integral part of how we care for our patients and offer these services among the range of effective treatment options available to them.
Why?

Patients are demanding care and the evidence for effectiveness is building:
Recent survey findings published in *The Journal of Clinical Pharmacy and Therapeutics* indicates that use of complementary and alternative medicines (CAM) is on the increase in the United States.

- Today, more than 40% of Americans use CAM for chronic conditions
- CAM was most frequently used for pain control, and nearly 50% of patients surveyed reported using CAM because their prescribed medications were ineffective
- More than half of these surveyed patients used dietary supplements or herbal therapies, and almost two-thirds of the patients found CAM helpful, and
- 30% to 70% of cancer patients who are inadequately treated by their physicians turn to CAM in the hope of curing or alleviating their pain

As importantly! And I know I am on shaky ground when I say this to Minnesotans, but for those of you who might have seen the Wall Street Journal article on Wednesday, Nov. 19, the Packers players are now given deep tissue massages or a scar tissue treatment known as the Graston technique on Fridays to help stomp out muscle injuries. I think this requires a call to Action to Mike Zimmer of the Vikings to get over here and partner with Northwestern Health Sciences University - wouldn’t you say?

On a more serious note, as a health sciences university, we sit in an important place in the history of our nation. Both higher education and health care in the U.S. are undergoing a transformation. Despite being one of the most progressive nations in the world, our current health system and our education system are both broken!

From a health care perspective, a recent study by the Commonwealth Fund published this past summer compared the U.S. to 10 other nations on major indicators of population health status. Despite being the most expensive health care system in the world, we - the United States of America - were ranked last or near last on most measures of health outcomes. Throughout my career and even long before I started in health care 20+ years ago, the SAME questions continue to be raised about the cost, quality and access to health care our current system provides.
In terms of our educational system, it is interesting to note that the same set of concerns - cost, quality, access - apply to education. Headlines everywhere are filled with questions and concerns about the value of higher education. Increasingly colleges, universities, boards and faculty are being asked to explain why the cost of tuition had been consistently increasing while the education we are providing is not necessarily leading to jobs and careers. While the majority of our students at Northwestern are gainfully employed after graduating from our programs, this is not true for other universities.

Across the higher education sector, many, if not most students are graduating with enormous debt and in a lot of cases unmarketable skills. Today, essentially, the value our students and their families are getting for the level of investment in their education is unclear.

Given these facts, we as a small university in the thriving metropolis of the Twin Cities area, faced with both sets of system issues, need to recognize that our challenges are great. But let me be clear - from my viewpoint, our opportunities are even greater!

Why do I say this?

While the data is not all in yet, there are important signs that the type of care we offer in our professional programs and through our clinics at Northwestern are not only clinically effective and less expensive, they are potentially disruptive to our current health system. The data that is emerging on spine and neck manipulation; the data on the role of Chinese herbs to influence the growth of cancer cells; the growing interest and recognition of the role of acupuncture in pain management; all suggest that we are in a university that is at the very heart of having enormous potential to improve the quality of care for patients and families without requiring such widespread use of medications or expensive and invasive medical procedures and to do so cost effectively.

While there is still much to be learned and understood, the data and the feedback whether anecdotal or scientifically collected are all pointing in the same direction. There is something here. There is really something here! While all of you know this in our audience today, we as a community must continue to work together to spread the message, to engage others in a dialogue and a scientific debate. We must elicit support from our funding agencies, our sponsors and our employer communities, among others,
to study this more. This makes my mission, in fact our mission all the more important as we have the power to help people live happier, healthier, and more fulfilling lives. What a wonderful contribution to our community and our broader society.

In addition to disrupting health care as we know it today, we are also in need of greater experimentation with our educational agenda and research facilities. We as a university and a faculty community need to challenge ourselves to ensure that we are delivering our educational experience in a contemporary and engaging way for today’s students. This means embracing new technologies and new ways of learning such as online. This means evangelizing and solidifying our philosophies and practices as part of, and not an alternative to, traditional Western and clinical medicine. While there is some great work going in our University to incorporate learning technology and consider new ways of doing things, we must do more. Today’s students are graduating from high schools and community colleges, and from our most prestigious institutions with a learning experience and set of expectations that has embraced technology. Laptops, Iphones, Androids, social media, MOOCs, adaptive learning, competency based curricula, all of these are tools and technologies that we need to experiment with, innovate around and continue to push ourselves to ensure that we are delivering a cost-effective, high quality, rigorous academic and clinical experience that connects with today’s students and patients on their level and in new and exciting ways.

Moving forward, as we shape our future together, some words that only begin to describe and capture the essence of who we are and our value proposition to our students, our patients and our communities are as follows:

Holistic, Natural
Conservative
Integrated, Integrative
Non-invasive
Evidence based
Cost-effective
Transformative
Student, Learner
Patient centered
To me these are the terms, the language we will be using that reflects our fundamental values as we take on enormous challenges and leverage the equally enormous opportunities that lay ahead.

As a University, we have been humble in proclaiming the value, importance and role of our practices in the healthcare equation. It’s time to be bold and to firmly establish and communicate the importance of our work and the role that our graduates have in helping to create a healthier society and one that understands the best method to reduce healthcare costs and create a healthier population is to focus on health, wellness and prevention – this is ground zero for many of our academic programs and healthcare practices. Now, it is time for us to step out from behind the scrim, to harness our power, our reputation and our brand to build an even stronger community, to advance our mission, to tell our story, to build the evidence base for our work and to not just lead in higher education and health but to be at the forefront of a NEW TRADITION in health care and good medicine for our patients and their families.

As you can tell, I can get quite passionate about the future and the potential for us to grow and to lead!

My time at this podium today is limited and we have many things to share and to celebrate. At the risk of waxing too long, let me say that we should truly be excited about the road ahead, the opportunity to innovate at even our most basic level and to advance our institution to serve more students and patients.

But before I close, I’d like to reflect on this piece for a moment. Some of you may be wondering why we have chosen to combine this inauguration ceremony and installation of the president with our graduation ceremony. Clearly, this president has a lot to say. Some students, some alumni, some in our community have said, your inauguration is important but it is a distraction from the graduation. Others have said, these ceremonies are equally important and deserve to be celebrated separately and at different times.

In response to those who would like to better understand my rationale, I say this:

- Again, the headlines are full, if not fraught with articles and discussions about the lack of accountability in higher education.
- Our students in all of our institutions are graduating with, in some cases, significant debt that for many amounts to an academic mortgage upon graduation.

- We as leaders in higher education need to take seriously the fact that our higher education system is broken. The business model that has sustained us for so long has not adapted to the new realities of running an institution of higher learning and to the new and different ways students desire to learn.

- Until we can find a fix or a cure or a new solution, it is simply unacceptable to me as your new president that we spend our limited resources on a giant party for a new president.

- Yes, we honor and celebrate the tradition today, but if we do that and lose sight of why we are here, then we have missed the mark.

- So for me, as a first and clear demonstration of my commitment to our students, this ceremony of installing a new president and talk about a new vision, must immediately return to our core focus and that is on our student’s success.

For these reasons, we chose to honor the inauguration tradition but quickly return our focus to celebrating our student’s success at graduation.

To my fellow college and university presidents, I would also like to issue a call to action. It is time to stop and to step back and together recommit to the success of our students. I mean really commit. Everything we do needs to be reexamined through the lens of one single question: Is this in the best interests of our students? In our case, is this also in the best interests of our patients?

This requires more than just a reflection and a few thought provoking statements, it requires that we move from this reflective place into action so that we can ensure that our students are getting value for their investment, have the highest quality academic and clinical training to serve their patients and communities and that we as an institution continue to find a more affordable and competency focused way to help get them to success.

So, in closing (yes, I am almost done), I will say again how excited I am to be a part of this community and to accept – no, to embrace - the challenge and the responsibility of working with the Board, our leadership team, our great faculty, our alumni, our corporate partners, our foundations and our students to lead Northwestern forward.
What I bring to the role is something that I learned early in my career and have continued to try and practice in each and every role on the way to here. As a great mentor of mine taught me in my early days a doctoral student at Johns Hopkins:

At this level of academic accomplishment and professional success, there is only one thing that differentiates those who succeed in the long run from those who don’t:

It is our integrity. Yes, we need leaders with the ability to create and articulate a vision, yes we need leaders to engage people to lead the hearts and minds of our talented people toward that vision and yes, we need leaders who can execute, that is, produce measurable results of our progress and operate from a place of accountability.

I would add to this list, however, and say that to those who are given much, much will be asked. To those who are asked, we find ourselves making big and tough decisions when the data isn’t always readily available and the ‘right’ answer is something not readily apparent. In fact, given the enormous changes and opportunities we are discussing, there are likely multiple ‘right’ answers ahead.

In the deepest part of who we are as leaders though, the best we can bring to our roles, is to focus on earning the respect and trust of our people and our communities. We have to demonstrate how and where integrity shows up in our professional and personal lives.

Simply said, to me integrity is about ensuring that what I think, what I believe in my heart, what decisions I make, what actions I take, I do from a place of alignment. Everything from my head to my heart, to my voice, to my hands must be in alignment.

Alignment and integrity, is what I bring and will continue to practice in my role as your President. Alignment and integrity is what we seek to demonstrate from our institution, and ultimately, the principles of good education and good care to improve the health and wellness of our students and our patients.

May God as you understand this force in the world, bless our work. May the Universe continue to shine a bright light on Northwestern Health Sciences University. May you leave here today with a new energy, a new excitement and renewed commitment to the incredible journey we are about to take together.

Peace.