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PRESIDENT KELLY: "IT'S OUR TIME!"

UNIVERSITY POSITIONED FOR BRIGHT, THRIVING FUTURE, ANCHORED IN EXCELLENCE

August 19, 2025

Read time: about 18 min

President Kelly's State of the University Address, August 19, 2025

As prepared for delivery in the Diamonstein Concert Hall at the Ferguson Center for the Arts:

Good morning everyone, and thank you for joining us on this important day as we reflect on the year that was and we look forward with great optimism to the start of another academic year on the campus of Virginia's No. 1 regional public university.

Today truly is a great day to be a Captain. Angie and I consider the opportunity to be a part of this incredibly special place and serve as its sixth president and your First Lady as the privilege and honor of our lives. I am grateful to gather with all of you today to share an update on our University.

Before I get too much into the year ahead, I must stop and thank our colleagues, friends, and supporters who make what we do possible day in and day out.

First, my thanks for the inspired leadership of our Board of Visitors, and we welcome past and current Board members with us this morning. My thanks to our Rector, Ms. Christy Morton, Captain for Life from the Great Class of 2001. Madam Rector, I am grateful for your leadership, your mentorship, and your friendship.



My thanks for the support of local, state, and federal elected officials, faith leaders, education leaders, corporate leaders, nonprofit leaders, community leaders, alumni leaders, and the many friends of the University in all walks of life.

You saw their names on the screen as you entered the Concert Hall, and we thank them for finding time in their busy schedules to be with us this morning.

To the CNU Family with us here today - thank you! You truly understand and embrace what it means to be a Captain.

No matter where you sit this morning, no matter what you will do this afternoon, whether your job is indoors or outside, in front of a computer, on the deck of a mower, or across from a student - you are a Captain. Thank you. Let's join in a round of applause for all who make this University such a special place.

Now let's look ahead and let me begin with the headline - IT'S OUR TIME! "It's Our Time" signals a moment of collective pride for our CNU community and a rallying cry for our students, alumni, faculty, staff, and friends.

We are entering a defining era for Christopher Newport as we gather today to begin our 64th academic year. It's Our Time to define the future for CNU, and so much of that future is founded on the bedrock of the commitment of those dedicated faculty, staff, and administrators who went before us.

As we set sail on this new academic year, we do so with our Strategic Compass firmly in hand. As my friend Bob Colvin says - a stationary object does not need a compass, and CNU is most definitely not a stationary object. We are in motion, and our compass will guide our way.

The Compass is our Strategic Plan for the next five years, and it was developed by hundreds of members of our University community. Our Board of Visitors provided the stamp of approval in February, and we have 49 teams made up of people from across campus...yes, 49.. moving out on the implementation of the plan as we seek to accomplish our vision.

The CNU Vision is clear and one that I see us live day in and day out:

We are anchored in excellence and focused on students, aspiring to be the nation's premier regional public university, offering an innovative education embedded in the liberal arts that advances the values of honor, service, scholarship, and leadership to empower graduates to lead lives of significance.

To accomplish our vision, we have come together as a University to develop and now implement the Strategic Compass, our North Star, if you will, that will guide us over the next five years. This campus understands what it means to be anchored in excellence, and you know we are unwavering in our commitment to that standard.

You are ready to think and act differently as we dedicate ourselves to making a CNU education accessible and affordable for every eligible student from all backgrounds who desires to be a Captain.

That education could be in the form of an undergraduate degree, a graduate degree, a certificate, a summer camp, a LifeLong Learning Society course, or in ways we haven't yet explored, but we most certainly will in the months and years ahead.

Our hard work in Admission is bringing results - for the first time in nine years, we will see our overall student body population grow. Our incoming class is the largest since the pandemic. We have the greatest number of out-of-state students enrolling in CNU since 2018.

We know many of those students will find a home right here in the Commonwealth after graduation, and more and more are graduating and starting their lives right here in Hampton Roads.

We will also welcome another record class of transfer students, young women and men who have said, "I have experience in college and now I too want to be a Captain."

As these new students prepare for their first day of class and our returning students make their way back to campus, they know that there is something special and different about this place.

They recognize that we put our students first in all we do, always embracing excellence as we deliver a world-class liberal arts education founded on our core values of Honor, Service, Scholarship, and Leadership that will prepare each and every student to live a life of significance.

Last year, I said the future of our University was bright. This year, I can say confidently, thanks to all of you, that the light we speak of is like the beacon from a lighthouse, guiding the way during challenging times.

We know where we are going, we know why we are going there, and we have the colleagues to get us there. Take a moment and look around this amazing concert hall, we are joined by so many who are invested in our collective success.

It is truly time to set sail, and we will be guided by our Strategic Compass as we define what it means to say, "It's Our Time!"

Our Strategic Compass has four main priorities, and it is our time to bring these priorities to life across our campus and throughout the Commonwealth and beyond:

Because we have so many valued members of our Hampton Roads community here today - let's begin right there.

It is Our Time to Connect with our Community.

As one of the finest regional public universities in the nation, it is Our Time to define what we will continue to do to serve our community and what new opportunities exist to embark on to enhance the quality of life on the Peninsula and across the Hampton Roads region.

CNU does an amazing job of partnering with leaders in the region to provide internship opportunities for our students. Eighty percent of the Class of 2024 had a full-time internship and 30% of those led to jobs right here in the Commonwealth. Those are extraordinary numbers and speak to the commitment of our faculty and staff and the value that our business and industry partners place in the preparation of each and every Captain.

People are noticing. Our Center for Career Planning received a top award from Handshake, recognizing it as one of the top 35 college career centers in the country, dedicated to student engagement and support.

Our commitment to being the Hometown University for the region truly took hold this year.

We will enroll our largest incoming class of Community Captains from Newport News Public Schools and An Achievable Dream Academy. And I am proud to share that we have signed a similar agreement with Hampton City Schools. This year, the number of students from Hampton applying to CNU and the number of incoming students from Hampton high schools nearly doubled. These are incredibly positive steps to connect with our community and I am grateful to all who are working to ensure we serve as the Hometown University for the community in which we live.

As we prepare for the start of the academic year, It is Our Time to offer solutions to critical needs in our community.

For the first time in more than two decades, CNU is offering an opportunity for undergraduate students to pursue nursing and elementary education degrees. Our community needs talented and dedicated Captains to fill these important roles. I'm thankful for the opportunity to partner with our colleagues at the Riverside College of Health Sciences to develop a creative solution to serve the nursing needs for our community.

And we cherish our continuing partnership with the school systems on the Peninsula, and I am confident our students entering into the elementary education major will welcome additions to schools across the Tidewater region.

We know that two of our greatest gifts that we share with our community are the Ferguson Center and the Torggler Fine Arts Center. The shows and exhibitions we share with the campus and our community truly enrich the entire region. The Torggler Fine Arts Center received national acclaim this year for its Anna Hyatt Huntington exhibition, and I know we all look forward to what's to come in the year ahead. The Ferguson Center has an amazing slate of shows and concerts to build off the success of its 20th year.

In January, we are looking forward to a very special evening on campus as we truly define what it means to say It's Our Time for the performing and fine arts. On the evening of the 24th of January, we will celebrate the Arts for All Ball.

The Ball will be an incredibly special evening and it will be a springboard for our efforts to connect with our community and provide the resources to serve all who desire an opportunity to enjoy the cultural benefits the Ferguson and Torggler provide year in and year out.

As we gather today, we are a week away from the start of another athletic season on the campus of one of the nation's premier Division Three athletic programs and the winningest program in Virginia at any level.

Angie and I have been so impressed since the day we stepped on campus at the commitment to our athletic programs and the support our community demonstrates season after season to cheer on our Captains. We are grateful to all for your support of our student athletes, much like the Ferguson and Torggler, our courts and fields are a gathering place for our campus and our community, and we thank all who support our Captains and their winning ways. And don't worry folks, you will get a Go Captains before the day is out.

Our Strategic Compass is clear in its direction to our campus to strengthen existing bridges to the community and build new connections. We are planning a Community Walk later this fall to another of our nearby public schools. And I want to ensure everyone knows they have an open invite to join me and our students, faculty, and staff for our Wednesday Morning Walks with the President.

Now I understand that 630 a.m. may not be your time, but It is Our Time to gather as a community week in and week out. We would love to have you come out and join us for a walk, the first one of the season is tomorrow at 630 AM!

And our commitment to our community grows out of our commitment to the liberal arts.

The value of the liberal arts to the broader community is both practical and cultural — it's about building the intellectual and civic infrastructure on which a healthy society depends and that is why It is Our Time to continue to Advance the Power and Promise of an Education Embedded in the Liberal Arts.

We are and will remain a University focused on delivering the finest liberal arts education for our students and It Is Our Time to fully assess the curriculum to ensure we are preparing our students to meet contemporary challenges and career demands while also responding to the interests of prospective students.

The provost will soon charge our faculty to evaluate the Liberal Learning Core Curriculum over the course of the next year. This effort will truly ensure we are advancing the power and promise of an education embedded in the liberal arts.

The commitment of our faculty to student-focused research is incredibly noteworthy. Over the past year, we have earned the designation as one of the top research universities of our type in the country, according to the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. This classification is a testament to the groundbreaking work of our faculty and students.

Over the course of the past academic year, we received more than \$5 million in research grant awards for our University. These are noteworthy accomplishments and are worthy of a hearty round of applause!

So many exciting developments are underway in every one of our schools and colleges. This year, we will launch the School of the Arts and the Institute for Public Humanities. The College of Arts and Humanities is about to open a virtual reality lab this fall, which will be available to the campus community.

And while we are an institution anchored in the liberal arts, we also excel in STEM and business. More than 70% of our Captains earn a STEM or business degree. And soon it will be Our Time to define what the new Science and Engineering Research Center will mean not only for CNU but for our region. The state of the art 83,000-square-foot center is on track for a January 2026 opening and we will have the opportunity to define how it serves the educational and research pursuits of our institution as well as craft a vision for how it can best serve the Commonwealth.

And to be clear, all of our graduates flourish, whether their majors are in STEM, business, the arts, humanities or social sciences.

Employers want students who have the broad-based skills that come only from a liberal arts education. The most recent data shows that, on average, roughly 94% of our graduates are in graduate school or employed within six months of graduation.

It is Our Time to double down on the investment we have made in leadership on our campus. Leadership permeates this campus in everything we do and say. We see it every day and it is our time to expand the opportunities for leadership education and leader development beyond just our President's Leadership Program.

I have challenged our Cabinet and our University to think more broadly about how we can serve and support the development of our leaders not just in the classroom but across our campus.

This year, we will take a profound step to enhance our national reputation as a university committed to leader development as we apply to be a Carnegie Leadership for Public Purpose University - a distinction shared by only 25 other U.S. universities.

The designation is earned by universities that demonstrate a steadfast commitment to creating a campus culture of leadership - and we certainly do that. It Is Our Time to expand the opportunities to all students and ensure we invest in the leader development of our faculty, staff, and the community we serve.

So let me break some news as we prepare for our SACSCOC Accreditation in 2027. I know many of you have been engaged in the discussions around our Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) that is part of our accreditation process and represents a significant University focus in the years to come.

As you are aware, in April, the selection committee concluded its process and presented me with two potential topics for our next Quality Enhancement Plan that focus on student learning and outcomes. This summer, I engaged in numerous discussions with other university presidents, community leaders, our cabinet, students, deans, the Faculty Senate president, and our faculty and staff about the topics. These conversations strengthened my belief that it is essential for us to help students and our University develop literacy specifically in the realm of artificial intelligence (AI), when and how to use it effectively, and, this is critical, how to use it ethically. Technology will always change, but our loyalty to the Honor Code and to never outsource the commitment to education and learning will remain constant and unwavering.

It Is Our Time to make AI work for all of us. We did not anticipate this as a major focus when we started the Strategic Compass process, and yet it fits within our priorities. There will likely be other challenges and opportunities that emerge in the next few years and we will use the Compass to guide our work. As we strive to deliver the finest liberal arts education in the Commonwealth, we must ensure we do so in a manner that is sustainable and that is why It is Our Time to Build a Foundation to Thrive.

We are committed to ensuring our relatively young University continues to grow and thrive. One way we can do that is by continuing to keep costs down and ensure a CNU education is affordable for all. Right now, of the 15 public colleges and universities in Virginia, we are the fifth most expensive in terms of tuition and comprehensive fees. It is incumbent on all of us to ensure that we examine and exhaust every opportunity to ensure a CNU education remains affordable for every student who desires a world-class liberal arts education on board this beautiful campus.

That's why It's Our Time to examine our business model, take a hard look at how we operate, identify efficiencies, and reimagine the opportunities for all students on our campus.

I look forward to working with the Budget Advisory Committee so that we can be ready for what is a still-evolving financial picture. We must ensure we continue to maintain our first-time-in-college enrollment numbers, while we pursue opportunities to provide a CNU educational experience to a broader array of students from across the Commonwealth, from right here on the Peninsula, and for those students from out of state and around the world who are learning more about CNU each and every day.

We will explore every avenue for expanding our graduate school programs, we will continue to build bridges for students from the community college system, and we will seek to serve adult learners, transitioning military members, and those students looking to re-engage in their own educational pursuits.

This work will be challenging, but it is the right work to do at this time and place. Your voices were heard loud and clear through the Strategic Compass effort and we collectively recognize that as a regional public university, the finest one in Virginia, that we must continue to think differently to ensure we fulfill our mission and vision.

A great example of that is the new approach we have taken to philanthropy over the past year and the results have truly delivered. Last year was a record-breaking year for our fundraising efforts, and I thank everyone who gave of their time, talent, and treasure to ensure CNU exceeded \$15 million in philanthropic support for this University!

With the success of last year providing wind in our sails, it is Our Time to prepare for the University's second-ever comprehensive campaign. A campaign that will ensure we are well-positioned to thrive now and into the future!

And, It Is Our Time to continue to be the very best stewards of the environment in which we live.

Through a grassroots effort on our campus and with the financial support of the Redekop Foundation, our Going Greener initiative has truly taken off. We have seen significant reductions in our utility usage, increased recycling efforts, we have received national recognition for our campuswide sustainability efforts, and our new Plant Operations Building is being designed as a net-zero facility with construction slated to begin in the summer of 2026.

Speaking of ground, we consider all of these exciting steps forward because the University has been built on such solid ground. My thanks to my predecessors who did so much, so well, for so long to put us in this position.

We can only do the things I've spoken about this morning if we are all pulling in the same direction. That's why the Strategic Compass team created - It is Our Time to create a stronger culture of inclusion and belonging on our campus.

Our success as a campus will be directly proportional to the belief that each and everyone at this place, this University, truly embraces all who wish to belong and thrive in a community committed to inclusion, accessibility, and excellence.

This commitment is non-negotiable and I believe we have everything we need to create a University that is recognized as the most inclusive in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

This is an important statement and I am grateful for our Board of Visitors' support as we collectively work to ensure that every member of our campus and each and every visitor to CNU is met with a welcoming, supportive, and accessible spirit.

To assist us in achieving this goal, we are finalizing the creation of the President's Council on Inclusive Excellence. This council of volunteers will assist us in carrying out the goals highlighted in our Strategic Compass, but the real force for good are the women and men who walk this campus day in and day out.

You are the ones who dedicate yourselves in the classroom, on the fields of play, in the dining halls, and across the 206 acres that we call home. Together, we will ensure we are the most inclusive campus in Virginia and allow me to thank you in advance for always doing the right things the right way, for engaging in helpful conversation, and of course for always holding a door for a fellow Captain.

In a moment, we're going to announce the next Captain of the Quarter. But first a surprise, let's take a quick timeout to give away tickets to upcoming shows here at the Ferguson Center.

This year, the Ferguson Center for the Arts is bringing some of the world's most extraordinary performers to Christopher Newport. We're talking legends and icons — from The O'Jays, to the incomparable Yo-Yo Ma, The Beach Boys, the family favorite Sesame Street Live, the breathtaking Sarah Brightman's Winter Symphony and so much more.

Now — here's where it gets fun. One of you is about to win two free tickets in the first five rows to your choice of one of the shows I just mentioned.

Here's how: taped to the bottom of one seat in this auditorium is a silver star. Right now, I invite everyone to reach under your seat and check.

Do we have a winner? Hold that star up high so we can all see! Congratulations! You've just won two of the best seats in the house for an amazing performance at the Ferguson Center. See Bruce Bronstein in the lobby later to claim your prize!

For the rest of us — don't worry. There are plenty of incredible shows coming, and you can see them all listed at FergusonCenter.org. And remember, faculty and staff receive a 15% discount and student tickets are free to most shows. Check out the website, make your plans, and join us for an unforgettable season at Christopher Newport.

Now, I would like to welcome some folks on stage who have been recognized for working hard to deliver their very best each and every day. They are our previous Captains of the Quarter.

They were nominated by their co-workers and peers, and they represent the very best of all of us.

Since we launched this program, almost two years ago now, these are our Captains of the Quarter and all of them are invited on stage. In order of their recognition: Wes Mann, M.J. Taylor, Ivette Sabater, Jack de Los Santos, Marke Hesse, Walter Walker, and David Salomon.

Now it is time to name the newest Captain of the Quarter. Here are the nominees and you can see their names and positions on the screen. Congratulations to Katie Aikens, Katrina Ayisumo, Patrick Butler, Kyron Holoman, Teddy Kavros, Van Jenkins, and Sydney Smith.

Now let's meet our winner.

This person is hugely valuable in executing their regular duties with professionalism, good humor, intelligence, and care; their willingness to contribute significantly to the student experience on campus makes them an excellent candidate for Captain of the Quarter.

They are an absolute professional responsible for both a crew of theatrical workers as well as a team of student technicians who, under this person's guidance, receive training beyond that offered by the CNU curriculum.

As a result, students working backstage for the Ferguson Center gain skills working with the best equipment in the industry, professionals from around the world, and all aspects of the performing arts in a professional setting.

In their regular duties, they are an indispensable presence at the University, overseeing smooth and successful production and performance for events ranging from campus activities to international tours. And this nominee always makes me sound good on stage!

Escorted by First Lady Angie Kelly, would you please welcome on stage our newest Captain of the Quarter - Van Jenkins!

Congratulations again Van and let's bring some more Captains out on Stage and Captain Chris is here to help us with the escorts.

Let's welcome members of our fall athletics teams and representatives from the Marching Captains.

Dr. Bob Colvin, representing our Strategic Compass teams. Dr. Michael Mulryan, president of our Faculty Senate. LifeLong Learning Society director Kenzie Byrd. Provost Quentin Kidd. And our deans...doctors Lynn Lambert, Nicole Guajardo, Tatiana Rezova, Jana Adamitis, and a special welcome to our newest dean, Luter School Dean Dr. Anna Hickey.

With these colleagues around me and Angie at my side, I want to conclude by sharing a few words about my time as your president. Angie and I have loved every minute of it. We can't wait to start this third year and continue our journey with you.

When I first arrived, I will admit I found it interesting when people would say to me, "CNU is the best kept secret." You have heard me say, "Why would anyone want to keep this amazing University a secret?"

Thanks to all of your efforts in all sorts of areas, I don't think that's true anymore and our record breaking number of applications this past year from both in-state and out-of-state students, as well as transfer students is an indicator that folks are learning more and more about CNU and that is a good thing and one more reason why It is Our Time to spread the good news.

On your way out this morning, I hope you will pick up one of our new CNU magnets. This is our parting gift for you today, but there is a story that goes with it. I had a conversation over the summer with a Captain for Life who offered some sage advice. I was sharing with him the story about the "Best Kept Secret" and he offered, "Bill, it's time, it's Our Time to ask the question, 'Why don't you know about CNU?'"

So I ask you, please place the magnet on your car or prominently display it on your fridge at home or wherever someone might see it, and when they ask, "What is CNU?," you can smile and politely ask, "Why Don't You Know About CNU?"

And then, with a smile, fill them in. Let them know, "We are the No.1 regional public university in Virginia, that we put students first, that we strive to be the most inclusive university in Virginia, that we live our core values, and that we are anchored in excellence in all that we do. You should check us out!"

So, on your way out today, please pick up a CNU magnet and share the story of this amazing University. And we have one other surprise for you as you depart today. Please take a moment to capture a selfie in the "It is Our Time" magazine cover. We have several outside, and if you're not the selfie type, we have folks ready to assist and take a picture with your phone.

I hope as you leave today you are as energized as I am about the journey we are embarking on together.

So as we go forth, let me end where I started. It is a great day to be a Captain, our future is bright, the wind is at our back, and our Strategic Compass is firmly in hand. I am so very excited about the future of our University.

Thank you again for joining us today. It is truly Our Time and as always:

Go Captains!
