

# TODAY

Davenport  
Edition  
2021



## Heading Out

Retiring President Richard Davenport looks back on 19 years leading Minnesota State Mankato

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## Davenport Edition

## Volume 22

## Issue 2

This issue of TODAY reflects on the accomplishments and advances made at Minnesota State University, Mankato during the tenure of President Richard Davenport, who retires June 30, 2021 after 19 years at the helm. As the stories within illustrate, his mark on the University is wide-ranging, his impact on colleagues, friends and students a lasting one.

The Davenport Presidential Scholars program has been established to provide student scholarships in the president's name. Please consider honoring President Richard Davenport's commitment and passion for student success by contributing to the fund at [mnsu.edu/davenport19](https://mnsu.edu/davenport19) or by scanning the QR code here.

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Photographer Steve Woit with President Richard and Mary Davenport in the back yard of their Mankato home.

Cover photo by Steve Woit



- Richard Davenport**, President
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- Mark Johnson**, Vice President for IT Solutions & CIO
- David Jones**, Vice President for Student Affairs & Enrollment Management
- Henry Morris**, Vice President for Diversity & Inclusion
- Kent Stanley**, Vice President for University Advancement
- Richard Straka**, Vice President for Finance & Administration
- Sheri Sargent**, Chief of Staff

## TODAY

- DAVENPORT EDITION** ..... **VOLUME 22 ISSUE 2**
- EDITORIAL DIRECTOR** ..... *Sara Gilbert Frederick*
- EDITOR** ..... *Joe Tougas '86*
- DESIGNER** ..... *James Mackey*
- ORIGINAL PHOTOS** ..... *Jackson Forderer, Steve Voit, Linda Clavel*
- PRINTER** ..... *Corporate Graphics Commercial*
- WRITERS** ..... *Grace Brandt '13*
- PRINT COORDINATOR** ..... *Ryan Schuh '00*
- CONTRIBUTING STAFF** ..... *Dan Benson, Kim Rademaker '93, Connie Wodtke '91*

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# FROM THE PRESIDENT

## LIFE-CHANGING WORK

My first university teaching position was at Iowa State University when I was 24. It coincided with the purchase of our first house in Ames, Iowa. I recall borrowing \$100 from a college friend to help with the down payment. Little did I know at the time that selecting that house in that particular neighborhood was going to change my life and future forever!

Though located in a nice neighborhood, our house was fairly run down and the neighbors undoubtedly had despised it for years for affecting their property values. In fact, the first question that would usually come up in a conversation with our new neighbors was, “do you have any renovations ideas in mind for your house?” Lucky for me it turned out to be a neighborhood where several deans and vice presidents lived. Talk about pressure to fix up that first house!

It is rare for a “wet-behind-the-ears” assistant professor to meet and get to know firsthand so many deans and administrators, including the president of the university. I was awed and overwhelmed as I was introduced to often nationally renowned educational leaders. In retrospect, I know they impacted my career thoughts and dreams.

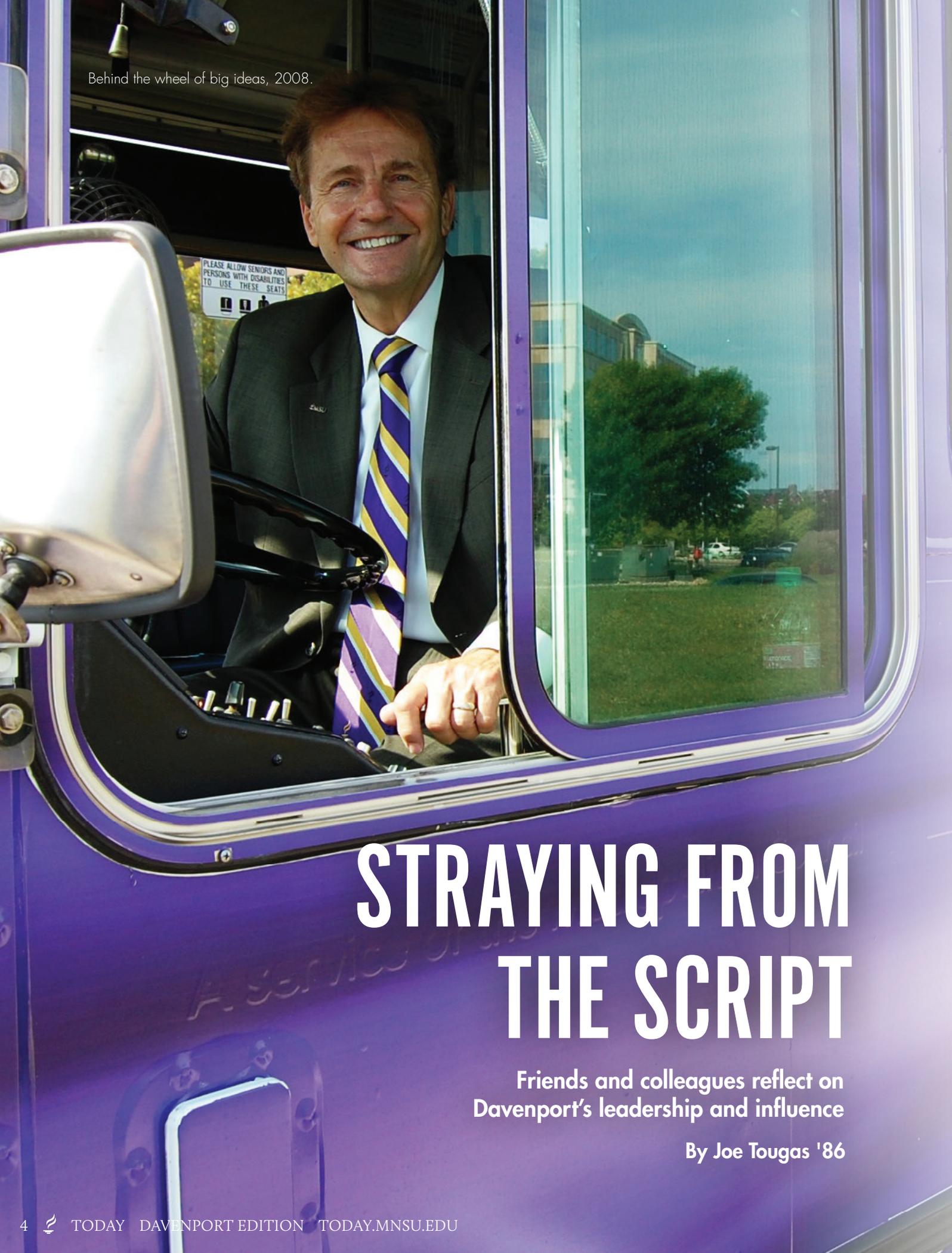
I had to do something about the house. As luck would have it, I met John Millsapps, who had just been hired in the same department at the University. He became a lifelong friend and sadly passed a number of years ago. John asked me to help him build a two-story addition to his house and garage, as he needed room for his growing family and antique car collection. Our friendship changed my life. John taught me some basic carpentry skills and got me interested in antique cars. Since then I have built and remodeled several homes and owned several old cars. Moreover, I was able to fix up our first house in Ames, much to the joy of our neighbors!

You might be wondering what this story has to do with my presidency at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Quite simply, if not for purchasing that house, I may never have met so many important and inspirational people. Those early neighbors unknowingly convinced me to become a university president. If they had sensed what I was thinking during our conversations, they likely would have laughed. Talk about my naiveté! Through those early encounters, an idea and a dream—a big idea—entered my thoughts and I began searching for the road map that led me to a career in university administration. It is that simple!

What I really want to share is my encouragement for all students and alumni to do what comes from your heart. Listen to your inner thoughts; do not be swayed away too easily. I urge everyone to keep their options open, learn from others and dig deeply to understand what drives you. You can do anything you set your mind to. I firmly believe that Minnesota State Mankato graduates who set their mind to a particular goal can be successful. We are fortunate to live in a world that encourages entrepreneurship and determination.

This will serve as my last presidential message. I wish our current students and 125,000 alumni the very best. Please remember your positive experiences at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

Behind the wheel of big ideas, 2008.



# STRAYING FROM THE SCRIPT

Friends and colleagues reflect on  
Davenport's leadership and influence

By Joe Tougas '86

**B**ig ideas. Real-world thinking.

For those who have worked with and been inspired by President Richard Davenport, that slogan of the University's is more than a tagline—it's the core of Davenport's approach to his job.

"He has an idea every five seconds," said Anne Blackhurst, president of Minnesota State University Moorhead. Blackhurst was previously a professor, dean of graduate studies and research and acting vice president for academic and student affairs at Minnesota State Mankato. She's one of many associates, colleagues and friends of Davenport who took in stride a constant outpouring of ideas toward making the University a better place to work and learn.

Scott Olson, president of Winona State University, remembers looking forward to the unpredictability and energy of working with Davenport while Olson was provost from 2003 to 2012.

"The man is not capable of thinking small," Olson said. "His brain is always going, and it's always something big and cool and exciting and student-oriented." Davenport was known to take copious notes at meetings, Olson said, but not always pertaining to the meeting at hand.

"His mind is restless, and so sitting in a chair for five hours listening to this or that ... the pen is going to come out," Olson said. "He's going to be thinking about something cool he read in the newspaper or some idea he's been germinating ... and then you know the next time you see him there's going to be this stack of hand-written notes. I often said at the time, if I had the choice of working for a boss who had too many ideas or a boss who had too few, I'd take too many any day."

Olson, Blackhurst and former provost Marilyn Wells are three examples of close to a dozen of Davenport's former colleagues who went on to lead other Universities. And all three are profuse in describing not only the influence Davenport had on the jobs they hold today, but his encouragement when they were at Minnesota State Mankato.

"I barely even thought of myself as a dean," said Blackhurst. "He changed the way I viewed myself and my career trajectory ... I would not be a university president if it wasn't for President Davenport."

As president at Moorhead, she frequently reflects on how Davenport approached the role with ideas, patience and pace.

"I have really tried—without maybe as many ideas as he has—to convey that same idea that we have to always be thinking about how to get better. That we can't rest on our laurels or think that we've arrived. We always have to be looking forward."

### **An open style of leadership**

Davenport was the first in the family to complete high school, let alone attend college, and he had no built-in advice or connections in leading a major university. So his approach to leadership is to get as much input from others as he can.



Former provost Marilyn Wells.

He often uses his cabinet as a sounding board for his wide-ranging ideas—and credits the cabinet for the University's strong standing in academics, enrollment and other priorities.

"He wants other people's thinking," said Kent Stanley, vice president for advancement since 2016. "It's not that he just automatically defers, but he will ask a question and it's kind of like throwing a hand grenade into the middle of the table and seeing how everybody is going to handle this."

Davenport, Stanley added, asks not for immediate action but instead to return to the next meeting with an informed, researched-based opinion.

"He basically uses most of us as external hard drives," Stanley said.

Similarly, Davenport was an eager participant in the University's shared governance model in which administration and union leaders meet monthly.

"It really mattered to him that we had the buy-in of the different constituency groups," Olson said. "There's a lot of schools that talk about shared governance—he really lived it in his heart. He wanted the bargaining units to be heard. He wanted the students to be heard. And it was our task to listen to them. So I learned that from him and I think I'm pretty good at it, too. I've learned that those things really matter."

Gregg Marg, University Faculty Association president, said the shared governance at Minnesota State Mankato is far more involved and thorough than at other universities—a credit to Davenport.

"A lot of presidents would come in and develop their own strategic plan or their strategic goals," Marg said. "[Davenport] said 'I want to hear from the university community on what you think our strategic plan should say, what are our values,' things like that. It was a great example to get everybody to have ownership over something instead of 'Here's what the president says.'"

### **Going off-script**

For 18 years, Bob Hoffman worked with Davenport as either a supervisor or employee. Hoffman was a member of the state university system hiring committee that selected Davenport. Hoffman also was recruited by Davenport in 2007 to head the University's Division of Strategic Partnerships.



Dr. Jim Connors '68.

“Sometimes his thought process would just blow you away,” Hoffman said. “You’d be sitting and say ‘Dick, what the heck? What are you talking about?’ He would have been a great poker player because he used cognitive dissonance really well. He kept you off balance. There were times where a number of us would just shake our heads but you know, a lot of those times, do gogg one it, his ideas made sense.”

Davenport was even more notorious for literally going off-script. More than a few colleagues recall moments of heightened curiosity when the president would stray from prepared speeches or ditch them altogether.

“Even when it came to convocation addresses, he never took himself too seriously,” said Lynn Akey, vice president of student success, analytics and integrated planning. Akey worked with Davenport on nearly a dozen convocation speeches over the years.

“And he never got so bogged down in the detail that he lost sight of the message he was trying to give,” she said. “For him, sometimes what he needed to share wasn’t the exact number or preciseness that some of us would revel in, but it was really about connecting with whomever he was speaking with, big group or small group.”

“You couldn’t say ‘Here’s what you’re going to say, let me write it down for you,’” said Hoffman, recalling a few University breakfast events in the Twin Cities with Davenport. “We’d have the bullet points. Well, forget it. He’d be off on

his own. But he had that amiable, unassuming attitude and people loved him for it.”

“Straying from the script is a classic Richard Davenport quality,” Blackhurst added. “I think everybody who has worked for him has watched him take a script and, while he’s sitting there waiting to go to the podium, turn it over and start jotting his own notes about whatever he wanted to say. And then probably get up to the podium and say something entirely different than what he jotted down, let alone what was in the script. Those things that could be frustrating over time just became endearing.”

Sometimes the improvised speeches were where Davenport introduced ideas, similar to cabinet meetings.

“There were occasions where the cabinet was paying very close attention to his fall convocation speech,” Olson laughed, “because it could be that the cabinet was hearing something for the first time.

“I actually grew to like that,” Olson added, “because he was pointing to a brass ring that was out of reach. He saw something. He wanted it to be a stretch, he wanted us to lean out and reach that ring. Maybe it was a little intentional on his part—that if you talk about a thing like that too much on the front end, people will find lots of reasons not to do it. But if you announce it, then people are going to feel ‘Well, I guess we better do it.’”

### Another side

Olson said one of the key takeaways of working with Davenport was seeing him lead from the heart. The most profound example for Olson took place when three Minnesota State Mankato students were killed in a freeway collision en route to a Society of Automotive Engineers competition in Detroit. The crash injured five fellow students and a faculty member in the same group.

“That’s the kind of horrific tragedy that university leaders dread,” Olson said. “And what was his thought? He flew to Michigan to be there with them, with the survivors, and then

Minnesota State University Moorhead President Anne Blackhurst



Clark Johnson '85, '90.



as the family members came. His thoughts were to those who were in the greatest pain.

“I learned so much from that, too. It was a horrible thing, and the loss of those lives will never be made whole again, but the way he handled it was so human, so caring, so big-hearted. And that was him. He had this playful, humorous fun side but that was one aspect of his humanity.

The caring was the other aspect. He felt that stuff personally.”

Penn State Brandywine Chancellor Marilyn Wells was provost and senior vice president for academic affairs at Minnesota State Mankato from 2013 to 2020. She and Davenport clicked early on, she said, not only as colleagues with similar pasts but with a shared passion for food—frequently swapping stories and ideas for dishes.

“I remember St. Patrick’s Day 2017, on a cold evening I massaged my wrist—I broke it in multiple places—and had to go to the hospital,” Wells said. “[The following day] Saturday I was home and I texted him to let him know. And Sunday afternoon he’s asking ‘What can I do for your family?’ and he’s bringing over fried chicken, mashed potatoes. He brought Sunday dinner over to my family. He was certainly going above and beyond what a president would do.”

### ‘A real gift’

Davenport’s lighter side was evident throughout his tenure, on campus and off.

Jim Connors ’68, who joined the Foundation Board in 2008 and was its president for a year and a half, recalled the generosity of Davenport and his wife, Mary, who had Connors’ three grandkids sit with them at a Mavericks hockey game.

“They sit down with ‘em, and of course Dick has banners and things to take back to their rooms back in Minneapolis, telling them ‘And if you need to get into school, give me a call.’ Stuff like that. That’s who he was.”

Clark Johnson ’85, ’90 served as a Mankato-area state legislator during Davenport’s tenure and also worked at the University for 30 years as student relations coordinator, leaving in 2014. As such he interacted with Davenport on two fronts, legislative and academic.

“He’s an affable guy,” Johnson said. “He’s also always a gentleman. He knew you can’t lobby by putting people down. There are certain unwritten rules about lobbying and that’s being totally honest, straightforward, consistent, pleasant, don’t hold grudges. He fit with that.”

Lynn Akey, the vice president for student success, analytics and institutional planning.



Winona State University President Scott Olson.

Akey, whose office is near Davenport’s, said she found it remarkable how often he made time for visitors to his office.

“I don’t think a lot of other presidents who deal with the types of matters he does will scrap their schedule and make time,” Akey said, “but I’ll see people who will just drop in. And he will make himself available to those individuals. To greet them, to share something special with them, and to make them feel special, appreciated and valued. That’s a real gift he has.”

“He is perhaps the kindest person I’ve ever met in in a presidential role,” Stanley said. “At his core nature he is a very, very kind person ... He goes out of his way to be kind to people and so out of that kindness is also a thoughtfulness.”

From the lives touched through leaders he’s launched to the University’s growth as an institution, Davenport has created a legacy that suits the motto he so fully embraces.

“That ‘big ideas real-world thinking’ mantra—it’s him,” Olson said. “He’s a man with big ideas and he’s a man with real-world thinking. That’s him. And that’s Mankato.”



# The Exit Interview

By Joe Tougas '86



President and Mary Davenport outside their home in Mankato.

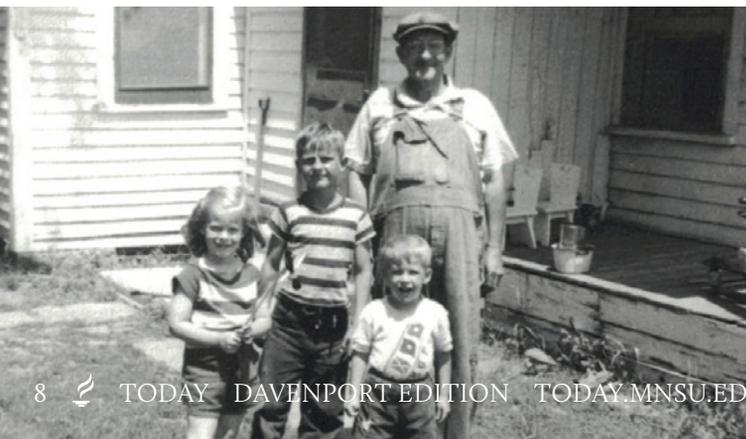
**Retiring University President Richard Davenport sat down for a talk about 19 years at Minnesota State Mankato—during which the university became the flagship of the Minnesota State system. What follows are highlights of the interview.**

## Were you raised in an academic household?

Nobody in my family had gone to college. I grew up in kind of a bad situation. My mother died at age 32 of cancer. There were seven children at that time and a couple years later, my father remarried and had four more children. Adopted one along the way, too. So, I came from a big family. Everyone was expected to work, which I think is a blessing now. At the time I probably didn't. I know now it really made you realize how important working for yourself was, and learning how to do that independently.

When I graduated from high school—I was the first to graduate from high school—I remember that I wanted to go to [University of Nebraska] at Kearney which was close to Grand

7-year-old Davenport, in striped shirt, with his grandfather Ed Vestrem and two friends in Worthington, Minn.



Island, Nebraska, where I grew up. I was so upset because I didn't have the money.

When it came time to go to college, I couldn't really get help from my family because it was such a large family, and I didn't have enough money saved, but I was offered a job with Nash Finch and one of their largest grocery chains was called Jack & Jill. They made me an assistant manager of a division. Finally, I had enough money and got a little scholarship money to go to Kearney. I told my Dad, I'll be going to college next year. He says "You're giving up a job like this, with benefits? You can move right up the chain here and manage one of these stores someday..."

So, his perception of the whole thing was, You have a sure thing—why would you give that up? He wasn't really happy, but he came around. When he came to my graduation, I think he was pretty proud.

## Was there a family member or anyone else who influenced your career?

Because of all the children in the family there were just too many kids for one person to manage. So, my dad farmed us out in the summers. Some to each grandparent, some to aunts and uncles, and so forth. I was sent to my sister, who was recently married to a guy in ROTC in the Navy, and he

was a graduate student at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. Well, I thought this would be fantastic, but I drove her crazy. I think I was 12 years old at the time, she said “Larry, you gotta take him with you.” He taught astrophysics and he took me to all his classes. And I’d sit in the back of the room and take it all in. Admittedly, I didn’t understand what they were talking about, but I was fascinated because I had never been on a college campus and here I was watching these college students and my brother-in-law. I said to myself, this is what I want to do. I want to work at a university. And 12 years later, at age 24 I got my first university teaching job at Iowa State University. It was a premonition or whatever, I don’t know. But I did end up doing exactly what I dreamed about.

My brother-in-law made the biggest difference. He knew that none of my brothers or sisters had gone to college, he knew that I expressed interest in going to college, and he encouraged me on. He’d check in occasionally and see how I was doing. That’s the story of how I ended up in higher ed.

### **What was it like coming from an academic background into a presidency?**

Let’s just be really honest: There was a great deal of naiveté regarding how long it would take.

After two years at Iowa State, I obtained my doctorate and moved forward on a tenure track position. I remember talking to the president of Iowa State University, his name was James Hilton—he’s famous today—and I asked him what it was like to be president. President Hilton was a widower and was seeing the dean of home economics, who lived next door to me. Surprisingly, he shared stories about it. And I said, obviously naive, “You know, I think I’d like to be a president!”

It’s sort of surreal. I’m 26 years old. I moved into this really nice neighborhood in Ames, Iowa, into the cruddiest house. It was really run down. And, it turns out my neighbor was the dean of home economics. Across the street was the dean of off-campus programs and down the street about a block away was the dean of the veterinary school. So, I just happened to fall into the middle of all these university administrators. So anyway, not being afraid, and not knowing that much, I’d see them in the yard, and we’d talk about everything.

They must have thought, “Oh here’s a nice little guy, isn’t that something, he’s thinking about wanting to be a president.” President Hilton told me “Here is what I’m gonna recommend you do, Richard: I want you to go down to the University of Iowa in Iowa City and I want you to talk to the president. He’s a friend of mine. And ask him what he thinks about your career plans.”

I followed his direction. And the University of Iowa president gave me some really good advice. He said there’s no easy way. There are no shortcuts. I’ve used that line many, many times with leaders and administrators and others that I’ve worked

with over the years. Those that try to take a shortcut, it just doesn’t work. So further conversation was: Get yourself tenured, move up in rank, become a professor, volunteer for all the committees possible so you can learn and understand the nature of a university and so forth. So, I followed his advice. As a matter of fact, I probably over-did it.

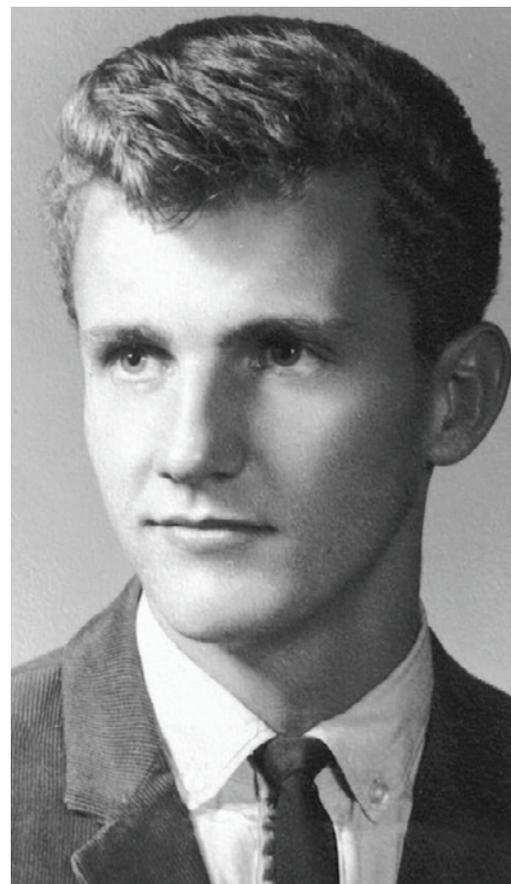
### **What were you looking for in cabinet members?**

Start with the premise that no one can be everything. You can’t be an expert in finance and an expert in public relations and marketing and an expert in student affairs. I knew where my strengths were—they were on the people side. I really enjoy learning about others. So I made sure that the people who were part of the team were really good at their disciplines.

When a person starts with nothing, you study people and develop street smarts. I could interview people and had my own sense, intuition, my own barometer in figuring out what they knew and how hard they were willing to

work. I think that made a difference. The other thing I did was purposely try to take the fear out of working for me. And put something in place of it: motivation and personal fulfillment.

When I hired anybody I’d say the same thing: Okay look, this is a partnership. I want to help you in your career, so what is it you want? Let’s figure out what it takes. And that’s really true for everybody I hired. What is it you want, what’s on your list? And one thing I learned is you can’t just say that. You really have to put something behind it. I provided lots of funding and opportunity for growth and development and I’m just so pleased that so many colleagues have been successful.



The first high school graduate in the family. Davenport’s Grand Island, Neb. senior photo.



A classic car aficionado, Davenport gets his prized 1929 Packard 640 Phaeton ready for a spin.

### **How does it feel seeing former cabinet members becoming leaders of their universities?**

I'm not surprised. But I'm so very happy for them. They are good at what they do. I don't know how much I might have contributed to their success, but I think they were given some of the right experiences that have helped them become outstanding leaders.

### **You've also been credited with knowing how to work well with legislators on behalf of the University. What was your approach to that part of the job?**

I don't try to be somebody I'm not. I think I can relate to a lot of people from different backgrounds. Glen Taylor is a role model in many ways. He and I have had some wonderful conversations over the years. He's an inspiration for so many leaders. I often consulted him on big decisions and over the years our friendship developed. I admire his unassuming air and he is never a self-promoter. I'm proud to be a friend. There are many other role models, too. I don't hold up being a president over anybody's head ... I can usually read people pretty well. I can be wrong, I'm not infallible, but I usually can. So I can work with the legislators and sit in their office and talk to them, drink coffee or whatever. Sometimes that's all it took. New buildings and fundraising just don't happen. It was always a little deal-cutting. I know, for example, a number of the new buildings we got from the legislature were a result of those relationships.

I spent a lot of time listening to legislators on what they need or what they want, or what they'd like to see changed. I'll give you one example. The legislative leaders up on the Iron Range wanted us to deliver an engineering program. They first went to the University of Minnesota and they turned them down. And then they went to the University of Minnesota Duluth, and they were not interested. And so a former state senator, Jerry Janezich, arranged a meeting with several legislators from the Iron Range. After I outlined the costs of delivering the expensive engineering program and noted that we could not handle the associated costs, they chimed in and said, "we'll handle the costs and you deliver the program right here on the Range." And sure enough, they funded it and the program is as strong today as when we first launched it. That was a good deal for both parties.

The other thing too, I would say, is I never made enemies. Hold your tongue, even if you're not happy with something. As soon as you make an enemy, they're probably an enemy for life. I took advantage of the opportunity to meet with the most important people in the state. I just figured out a way, I know somebody that knows somebody, we get an introduction or go out for dinner. It was always remembering my humble roots, but pushing the envelope.

### **Are you aware of your reputation of improvising on the spot?**

I'm very much aware of what I'm doing. Before a speaking event, I'm walking through the audience and I'm meeting people; getting a vibe if you will. Then, I look at the script and I'll review it briefly before speaking. I'm not one to read scripts verbatim. Many times I'll evaluate and determine if the group is ready for a serious presentation, or if they're going to want to hear something more light-hearted. So, yes, there were some times when I would redo the script to match the audience's interest.

Now, am I infallible? Absolutely not. I have made a few mistakes when I've done that and there have been times when I thought, I should have stayed with the script. And the other thing I've learned is, no one wants to hear about you. Nobody wants to hear about what I've done. They want to hear what others have done. They want to hear how they have contributed. It's a very simple formula. It's never about you, so if you can take that ego and put it away in life and in work, you'll be successful.

### **Where do you get your ideas?**

The ideas are always there, but facilitated by watching, thinking and observing while considering how we can do better. I often try to see things from another's point of view. Ideas are all around you if you just tune in to others. When I go to the national presidential meetings, I'll sit in the audience listening intently while writing pages of notes about how we could enhance Minnesota State Mankato. We could do this, or we could do that and just tuck those thoughts away. Somebody else's ideas will frequently trigger a different one from myself. In retrospect, I know some of my ideas stuck, but I never ex-

With Minnesota 2019 Teacher of the Year Jessica Davis '01 at Target Field.





Giving scarves to students in February 2020.

pected that all the ideas would be implemented. And while I know some people rolled their eyes behind my back from time to time, I don't think I ever turned anyone off because most people enjoy hearing how we can make our University a better place.

### How does your wife Mary influence your approach to the job?

We really do make a great couple. I think in some ways we're a bit alike as is often the case. She's very humble, modest, she never brags about herself. I try to learn from her. And anytime I'd try to brag about her, she'd be a little bit embarrassed. I like to steer away from the limelight unless it's part of my job; sometimes it is required in promoting the University.

Mary's father was in higher ed, he was the dean of students at University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and became a vice president and went on to do some wonderful things. He went to Vietnam and brought back many, many families during the Vietnam War and afterwards. She had the experience of that understanding, learning empathy for those populations and others. She's been highly successful and as

a retired president of Rochester Community College, she is doing exactly what she wants to do. She loves the outdoors, flowers, gardens and travel. And get this: She loves old cars. So, I bought her a car: a 1947 Ford Convertible Deluxe. She loves that thing, but she's had to learn how to drive a stick shift again. We both love history and enjoy exploring.

### I know you hate these kinds of questions, but how do you hope the Richard Davenport "era" is defined?

I think we launched a lot of leaders during this period. And I think the impact of the leaders coming out of this institution is going to have a profound impact on our world, our country, on Minnesota. Our graduates don't necessarily come from wealthy families, but they have drive, strong work ethics and good values. I think we turned our University toward a goal of becoming the best public state university in Minnesota and the Midwest. And this will be an ongoing goal for the presidents that follow me. We will never be content as "average" and I believe our alums and students agree with me. And I think our Big Ideas focus was a step in that direction. Therefore, I think our graduates are going to be the ones who transform the University and its reputation. They're the ones who will make a difference in our world. They aren't afraid to roll up their sleeves, not afraid to work, not afraid to express their ideas. And if we started that during my tenure here, and that continues, that will be the legacy that I look for.

### You realize you just defined yourself.

I did? Oh. (laughs) ☺

Mary and Richard Davenport celebrating the University's 150th, 2018.



# A MONUMENTAL LEGACY

Buildings and construction under Davenport dramatically transformed Minnesota State Mankato

By Grace Brandt '13

The Minnesota State University, Mankato campus has changed significantly during President Richard Davenport's 19-year tenure. And every project that has been undertaken has focused on helping students succeed.

"In just about every project, [the president] always starts out with, 'How's this going to improve student success?'" said Paul Corcoran, assistant vice president of facilities management. "That guidance has led us to a lot of the successes we've had in keeping enrollment here at Minnesota State Mankato and guided the types of projects that we do."

Thanks to Davenport, his cabinet and all the people involved at every level of University projects, the University continues to ensure that students have the best possible experience on campus.

## Reimagining residence halls

When President Davenport arrived on campus in 2002, the University had three residence halls: McElroy, Crawford and Gage. Each of the buildings had been constructed in the late '50s-early '60s and were sorely in need of updates.

Luckily, Davenport had a vision right from the start.

"One of [President Davenport's] characteristics is that he sets out a vision, he's very optimistic, and he puts a lot of possibilities on the table," said Cindy Janney, dean of students and Residential Life director. "He doesn't say, 'Oh, gee, that wouldn't be possible...'. He just sets out a vision and says, 'We want to have the best residence halls in the system.' Because of that, our campus has achieved a lot."

It was Davenport who suggested tearing down the iconic Gage Towers instead of investing considerable funds in renovating them. He reasoned that students should have the best residence halls possible, which would be impossible if Gage was simply updated to the best version of its 1960s design.

The resulting project was massive in scale. First, a new residence community—Julia Sears—began construction. This \$25 million, 600-bed project was built with extensive student input, down to whether residents preferred doors for their closets. The building opened to students in 2008 and quickly became the most popular campus living option, thanks to its suite-style rooms and up-to-date amenities.

Next, construction started on the Margaret R. Preska Residence Community, which was finished in 2012. The \$23.3 million residence hall provided another 300 beds for students. That left the University about 250 beds short of what Gage provided, so before Gage Towers were demolished in 2013, the University leased the entire place at the nearby Stadium Heights apartment complex.

“We’re still operating the same size of a housing program,” Janney said. “[But now], we’re offering a mix of options for students, in keeping with President Davenport’s vision of a current, contemporary, desirable housing offering for our students.”

The last step of the project was completing a new, \$31.4 million University Dining Center, which opened in 2017. The new building was built with sustainability in mind, utilizing a composting service that cut down on waste by 92 percent, Janney said. Other eco-friendly touches included energy efficient windows and a heat-activated ventilation system.

According to Janney, the thoughtful planning that went into the new dining center shows students how much the University cares about their experience.

“That says to a student, ‘You are important, and we want you here,’” she said.

There have also been renovations to the Crawford and McElroy residence halls during Davenport’s tenure, including new radiators, air-conditioning and larger floor lounges for group study and events. Secure card access became the standard in all residential buildings, and



Ford Hall

high-speed wireless internet access is now standard as well.

## Students’ home away from home

Ever since the Centennial Student Union was constructed in 1967, it has served as students’ home away from home. Like any home, it has needed some updates, with three major renovations happening under Davenport’s watch.

The first took place in 2005—a \$14 million project that transformed an outdoor patio in the basement level into the Hearth Lounge, created a new entrance to the building and added the iconic floor-to-ceiling windows that now welcome visitors to campus.

“That area really revolutionized the building,” said Mark Constantine, director of the Centennial Student Union and Student Activities. “Creating the big atrium and the glass enclosure really was a milestone not only for the building and for students, but for campus.”

The second major renovation, in 2011, involved updating the ballroom on the second floor with state-of-the-art touches and technology. It now features 17 wall projectors and was Minnesota’s first conference space to offer seamless, near-surround video projection. Constantine calls it “one of the finest ballrooms in the Midwest.”

The final major CSU-related project during Davenport’s tenure was connecting the Memorial Library with the Union through an underground pedestrian connection, which Constantine calls “the connection,” in 2013.

The Margaret R. Preska Residence Community





Students in the Hearth Lounge of the renovated student union.

Constantine works closely with the students on the Student Union Board to glean input for every project. “We look to the students, because we consider the Centennial Student Union students’ home away from home, and we want student involvement in every aspect of all that we do here,” he said.

Davenport, he added, is always involved as well. “The president is very, very good [about working] with the student government, to make sure there’s independence for students to make good decisions about student-fee money,” Constantine said.

The ultimate proof that student experiences have been improved by the CSU’s various projects is how many students enjoy spending time in the building. “The Student Union is the students’ home,” Constantine said. “The proof is in the pudding. When you look at students and talk to [them], they would consider this their home.”

The renovated Centennial Student Union.

Student recreation and athletics got a significant boost with the \$8.4 million renovation of Otto Arena, unveiled at homecoming weekend, October 2005. Another sports addition came in 2019 with the \$6 million Maverick All-Sports Dome. This seasonal (October-April) inflatable facility with synthetic turf is usable for inter-collegiate athletics as well as community groups in the Mankato area.

### State-of-the-art learning

A top priority of Davenport’s has always been ensuring the best student learning environment possible. Only a few years after he arrived, he oversaw a major update to the Trafton Science Center including the addition of the Ford Hall wing. That \$32.5 million project added new classrooms and state-of-the-art labs and was finished by 2008. A second phase of Trafton renovation was a \$27.4 million refurbishing of the building’s infrastructure and upgrading of labs and classrooms, completed in 2010.

Davenport soon turned his attention to another need: better real-world learning opportunities for students in the College of Allied Health and Nursing. The University had tried several times to secure a bonding bill for a new building but hadn’t succeeded—until Davenport worked with the college’s new dean, Kristine Retherford, to put together another bonding request.

Retherford knew better than most how important it was to secure the funding. She had completed her undergraduate degree at the University in 1973—in the exact same footprint





The \$28.9 million Clinical Sciences Building opened in 2017.

that current students were using when she was named dean in 2012. Thanks to her extensive work, along with Davenport's ceaseless support, the University was finally able to secure state funding for a building. In early 2017, the \$28.9 million Clinical Sciences Building opened, featuring state-of-the-art technology and equipment for several programs housed within the College of Allied Health and Nursing.

Retherford credits Davenport's vision and support for the eventual triumph after so many years of work.

"He drove that whole process," she said. "He has a great ability to communicate that vision, not only to campus but also to the legislature and the system. He's been an extraordinary leader for all of us. It was his vision to get the funding and to support a need for that kind of facility."

The new building includes large clinical spaces for dental hygiene students, private consultation rooms for the speech and hearing program and six simulation labs for nursing students. Every space utilizes cutting-edge technology, better preparing students for what they'll face once they graduate. Students were asked for input at every step of the project, which resulted in a casual study space and informal meeting areas throughout most of the first floor.

"I think our students are better prepared in reflecting on how they're delivering their services and how they can do it better," Retherford said about the new location. "People are really excited to come to Minnesota State Mankato and major in Nursing or Communication Sciences and Disorders or Dental Hygiene because of the gorgeous facilities that we have."

### Sustainable endeavors

Throughout the last 19 years, the University has made great strides in becoming more sustainable, and Corcoran said that Davenport has always been "very supportive" of those efforts. The University had one of the first campus environmental committees in the state and was a leader in studying its carbon footprint. In 2017, the University completed an \$8 million energy retrofit through Minnesota's Guaranteed Energy Savings Program. The project included LED lighting, energy efficient improvements in heating and cooling systems and more.



The \$31.4 million University Dining Center opened in 2017.

"It takes a lot of analysis and design evaluation for building construction that saves energy and is more sustainable," Corcoran said. "We've always ventured toward taking advantage of the most energy savings and sustainability opportunities."

This focus on sustainability can also be seen in projects such as the Clinical Sciences Building, which has solar panels on its roof, and Trafton Science Center, which has a device on its roof that acts as a sort of a radiator to extract heat from air instead of venting it into the atmosphere.

Janney pointed to other evidence in Julia Sears, which boasts low-flow toilets, energy efficient lighting and windows that reflect heat from the sun in summer and retain heat in the winter. Meanwhile, low-flow shower heads conserve water, and high-efficiency fan motors consume 20 percent less electricity. These and other construction innovations make the Julia Sears building 30 percent more energy efficient than required by the Minnesota energy building code.

"Sustainability has been a huge feature of building updates and new construction during President Davenport's tenure," Janney said.

### Years of improvements

For Corcoran, who has been at the University in different positions for the last 28 years, the current campus is far better than he ever hoped—both in terms of how it has been renovated and in the new buildings constructed.

"I never imagined we would actually get so much new square footage," he said. "President Davenport has always been very helpful and focused on maintaining what we have. We've had the benefit of a better focus on repair and replacement and support from the administration. I've been very pleased and fortunate to have that kind of support from the administration to take care of what we have." ❧

# THE DAVENPORT ERA

A time of dramatic growth in academics and stature, closing with the biggest challenge faced by a president in the University's history.

What follows are some of the major events in the tenure of President Richard Davenport.

By Joe Tougas '86

At the sesquicentennial homecoming parade, 2018.

## 2002-2008

Richard Davenport's arrival at Minnesota State University, Mankato as its president was, for him, a culmination of a long long-held desire to lead a great university.

"His entire career up to that point had been very focused on academics," said Tim Huebsch '02, the student government leader who picked Davenport up at the airport for his on-campus job interview. Huebsch, who recently concluded a term as Foundation Board president, sat on the search committee that selected Davenport as president.

"And all of a sudden you're the president, all of a sudden you immediately shift: You're the public face of an institution, and everything that you spent your entire career up to that time [doing], you have to delegate. And that's a hard transition to go through," Huebsch said.

For 12 years, Davenport had served as provost and vice president at Central Michigan University in Mount Pleasant, Mich., which at the time had 27,000 students—compared to Mankato's 14,000.

During his first year in Mankato, Davenport spelled out his priorities, challenging himself and the University to

strengthen diversity, enhance graduate education, energize undergraduate research and build distance learning.

He spent the next 19 years making it all happen.

### Sidelined

Two years into his presidency, Davenport made statewide news, albeit for a personal health story. Since childhood, he'd had kidney issues, which flared up to alarming rates after taking office at Minnesota State Mankato. By 2004, he needed a kidney transplant.

A donor emerged from only a few feet away. Ginny Fitzloff Bessler, an administrative assistant in Davenport's office, volunteered to donate a kidney, a gesture she had vowed to make when her father passed away years earlier. The transplant successfully took place during Thanksgiving break.

"Ginny is a special person in my life and there is nothing I wouldn't do for her," Davenport said recently. "She risked her life to save mine. We are kindred spirits."

### Doctoral Programs

During his presidential interview, Davenport pledged he would fight for the approval to offer doctoral programs, and in the fall of 2005 the Minnesota state legislature made

it possible for Minnesota State Mankato to grant doctoral degrees.

It had taken some three decades of trying, but finally a change to state law cleared the path for state universities to offer applied doctoral programs in six areas—nursing, audiology, psychology, education, physical therapy and business. Up to that point, only the University of Minnesota could offer doctorates.

Although the push had been started by previous administrations, Davenport's determination was credited as well. He had, after all, overseen the installation of many doctoral programs while provost at Central Michigan. As he would prove throughout his time at the University, Davenport made a good impression on Minnesota lawmakers.

"He was able to get the legislature excited about it in a way that hadn't been ignited in the state before," said Scott Olson, former provost and vice president for academic affairs at Minnesota State Mankato and now the president of Winona State University. "It was a high priority with President Davenport."

Minnesota State Mankato immediately made plans to offer doctoral degrees in education, nursing and psychology.

"This is the last stage in our evolution," Olson said at the time. "When you begin offering doctoral programs, that's the last, greatest step you can take."

### Continued growth

In 2005, two dramatic construction projects were launched to enhance student life on campus. The year saw the first of three phases of renovations to the Centennial Student Union, beginning with the creation of the spacious Hearth Lounge and culminating in the connection of the union and the Memorial Library in 2011.

Campus athletics also received a sharp makeover in 2005 with the \$8.4 million renovation of Otto Arena that included new flooring, three basketball/volleyball courts, a jogging track, cardio fitness area, weight room, remodeled locker

President Davenport and kidney donor Ginny Bessler (formerly Fitzloff.)



At a July, 2015 news conference announcing the contract extension of Maverick Men's hockey coach Mike Hastings.

rooms and a student lounge. It was unveiled on Oct. 1, 2005 in the heart of homecoming weekend.

### Divisions

Since the 1996-97 season, the men's and women's hockey teams at Minnesota State Mankato have competed at the Division I level—but the other intercollegiate sports compete as Division II. In late 2006, the Division II North Central Conference commissioner announced that the conference would end after the 2007-2008 athletic season. While an option existed to reclassify the programs to Division I, the decision was made to remain at Division II and apply for membership in the Northern Sun Intercollegiate Conference.

Davenport decided the move to Division I would have been too expensive, requiring \$2 million per year, all without any guarantee that it would increase attendance or donor support for the University.

"It is highly unlikely that we could develop a viable financial plan for such a move," he said at the time. "Most of the cost of Division I affiliation would be borne by our students. Our students are already heavily invested in the athletic program, and burdening them with the added costs of Division I affiliation is unfair."

Former provost Marilyn Wells said Davenport had plenty of push from stakeholders to go to Division I.

"I think one of his wisest decisions was to stay D2," she said. "Sometimes your legacy is in what you didn't do. We didn't go D1. We stayed D2 and are a powerhouse in many sports in that arena."

# 2009-2015

### The Edina Connection

In an effort to reach non-traditional students in the Twin Cities, the University at Davenport's direction leased space in a visible office building at 7700 France in Edina, a building owned by alumnus David Frauenschuh.

It was an important move designed to offer flexible scheduling and less travel time for Twin Cities students interested in Minnesota State Mankato programs. The location today offers graduate, undergraduate and doctoral degrees in a number of disciplines.

As the doors to 7700 France opened to some 400 students in fall of 2008, a new relationship with Normandale Community College, in which students could take their first two years at Normandale and finish at Minnesota State Mankato, also started.

Such partnerships would be an ongoing priority for Davenport. His knack for establishing partnerships—which he'd done at Michigan—impressed the business-minded members of his hiring committee.

"I remember in the interview ... saying 'Well, I believe in the value of business partnerships,'" Davenport recalled. He mentioned one partnership that he'd worked out with Northwest Airlines. "And they asked, 'Is that the only partnership?' I said no, that I had finalized dozens of others. So, they got me talking about partnerships I had entered into all over the country and literally the world. Al Fallenstein, an individual on the search committee, turned to Glen Taylor and said, 'As far as I'm concerned, we're done. We've got the guy right here.'"

## Building boom

Determined to drastically upgrade residential life on campus, Davenport oversaw the construction in 2008 of the 600-bed Julia Sears Residence Community and, four years later, the 300-bed Margaret R. Preska Residence Community.

Those new buildings allowed for the demolition of Gage Towers, which were too expensive to maintain or retrofit. The towers came down in a public demolition in the summer of 2013.

More than 7,000 gathered to watch them fall. "That level of engagement," Davenport wrote in TODAY, "speaks volumes about what those buildings, and this University, have meant to people over the years."

Davenport also oversaw the \$32.5 million update to Trafton Science Center with the construction of its Ford Hall addition, completed in 2008 as well as the following \$27.4 million refurbishing of classrooms and labs. (For a story on more Davenport-era construction on campus, see page 12 in this issue.)

During Davenport's tenure, nearly \$300 million was invested in new construction on campus, plus annual money for repair and replacement.

"Since I've been here, the funding that we put into beautifying the campus and to adding new structures and new buildings has made it one of the most attractive campuses," Davenport said. "For the second largest university in Minnesota and one of the bigger universities in the Midwest, you're going to have a hard time finding a gem like this."

## A diverse campus

In late 2009, a 'Strategic Plan Report Card' was published that gave the president some points of pride in accomplishing many of the challenges he spelled out in 2002.



Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion Henry Morris

Along with the launch of 7700 France, the Sears building and an uptick in graduate enrollments, the report noted an additional development: In five years, diversity on campus grew by 153 percent.

Henry Morris has for the past 12 years served as head of what is now known as Diversity and Inclusion. Morris has worked with Davenport since the latter's first days on campus—when Morris was executive director of student affairs.

"The student population has surely grown under his presidency," Morris said, adding that domestic students of color make up about 18 percent of the student population today. Together with international students, they comprise a quarter of the student population.

"When I got here about 30 years ago, domestic students of color population were about 4 percent," Morris said.

His seat on President Davenport's cabinet "is a cabinet position in more than name," Morris said. "[This position] has departments that report to it. It has money to make a difference. Many diversity areas are a staff of one. Even though they may have a nice title, it's just a staff of one or two.

"When I look at my counterparts across the nation, I think we have one of the premiere diversity and inclusion areas in the nation and definitely for institutions like us—regional comprehensive state institutions. A lot of that is because it was a commitment President Davenport had."

Former provost Scott Olson said diversity was an ongoing pursuit for Davenport.

"His singular, unwavering commitment—this says a lot about him—was to diversity, equity and inclusion," Olson said. "This was so close to his heart. Anytime the university could get better at it, he wanted us to. He wanted to advance that in good times and bad, and if we faltered, he felt it really personally. Anytime something didn't go right for students of color, for female students, for folks who otherwise had been underrepresented in higher ed. He would often say that was his number one thing."

# 2016-2021

In 2017, the Strategic Partnerships Center opened in the downtown Hubbard Building, which brought an enhanced University presence to the city of Mankato and a resource for area entrepreneurs, student and non-student alike.

It was a time of celebration, as well. For a year, Davenport was involved in a number of events and observances commemorating the University's 2018 sesquicentennial. From four instructors and 27 students in 1868 to being the flagship institution in the state university system with around 15,000 students, the University's celebrations culminated with a downtown parade on homecoming weekend, 2018.

The addition of the 110,000 square-foot Maverick All-Sports Dome, unveiled in 2019, expanded opportunities for the University's athletic teams, general student population and community groups as well.

By all appearances, 2020 would be another year of progress. It became, however, the largest challenge of Davenport's professional life.

### **Pandemic times**

With the COVID-19 pandemic, Davenport was confronted not only with the most drastic pivot in the University's 150-plus years, but a need to take action quickly—not always a trait of institutional decision-making.

"The health of our students, faculty and staff and others. That was foremost in our mind when we began," he said in May 2020, by which point the University's work and learning environments had been transformed to remote operations, leaving the campus all but empty.

In a matter of three weeks, more than 3,000 classes shifted from classrooms, labs and lecture halls to the kitchens, basements and bedrooms of students and professors, all connected online. And while not perfect, it worked.

During those days, Davenport saw the benefits of a focus on student success that he had instituted pre-pandemic. It was an approach designed to make sure students felt cared for and valued.

A good year before anyone would hear of COVID-19, Davenport prioritized student success as a goal moving forward, with that success defined as retention, student completion and closing the racial opportunity gap. "We knew if we could improve that student success, we would grow like wildfire," Davenport said.

He called upon Lynn Akey to become the Vice President for Student Success, Analytics and Integrated Planning. Akey organized an effort that had among its pillars "demonstrating care in interactions with students."

In a wide-ranging system, students were checked on, guided and directed toward help when falling behind. Connections were made and appreciated, and when the pandemic upended life on campus, those connections were sorely needed—and provided.

"What we realized in March," Akey said, "was that suddenly our students had to leave campus for the most part and that everyone was lacking this connection that we had previously enjoyed. There was a real sense that we needed to reach out



Davenport's dining room table became his desk during the pandemic.

to our students as we were going through this massive transformation to remote learning."

Akey and her team recruited staff from around the University to make calls, take questions and work to get them answered. Within a month, nearly every student had been contacted—and Davenport made sure he was involved in taking and answering questions.

"We would look at the student's problem and say, Okay, we're going to figure this out. And we are not waiting for two days. We do it almost immediately, and I believe it gives some sense of relief and confidence in the families that are sending their sons and daughters here."

### **The successful exception**

A similar approach was taken to that fall's registration, with faculty volunteering to make calls to registered and prospective students to see how their summer was progressing and if they had any questions about the transition to the fall semester.

The result: In the midst of the pandemic, the University's enrollment actually grew at a time when most universities saw declines. Like all of the other triumphs of the past 19 years, Davenport credited his colleagues for that good news.

"Behind every single goal and accomplishment, there are many people involved," he said. "Not only do we have this fabulous cabinet of vice presidential stars that respect one another, we also have the expanded cabinet made up of approximately 30 associate VPs, deans and directors who deserve enormous credit. The whole team is out there working hard in an environment of respect and admiration for one another."

"It's the pride and the willingness to put forth the work and effort to make a difference," he said. "That's where we have excelled."

Davenport, the 12th president of the University, has one of the longest presidential tenures in its history. And that translates into a strong university, said former cabinet member and president of Minnesota State University Moorhead Anne Blackhurst.

"The longer a president can stay, the better it is for a university," Blackhurst said, "because you avoid that turn that happens throughout the institution every time a president turns over. [Davenport's] ability to do the job over the long term, to hire really good people, to keep them long enough to make a difference has been remarkable." ✍

Alumni Magazine

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Richard Davenport, age 5,  
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