Good afternoon everyone. Welcome to the first university senate meeting of the 2020-2021 academic year. For those senators and visitors who are new, my name is Deb Nichols and I am the duly elected chair.

Before I begin, I would like for all of us to pause and take a moment of silence for the nearly 200,000 persons in the United States who have died due to COVID-related illness. [PAUSE-15 seconds]. Thank you.

One of my favorite poems, first encountered as a freshman at the U of Rochester, was written by Adrienne Rich who, when interviewed about the power of poetry, said “In poetry words can say more than they mean and mean more than they say. In a time of frontal assaults both on language and on human solidarity, poetry can remind us OF all we are in danger of losing—disturb us, embolden us out of resignation.” Her poem, published in 1973, that resonates so powerfully with me and captures aspects of the current climate in our world is titled “Diving into the Wreck”. She opens the poem by describing from a first person POV exploration of a shipwreck. As the speaker continues to dive deeper into the ocean, they say:

“I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done.”

The poem finishes with the speaker saying:

“We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear.”

The words she refers to are the histories written by those with power. These written histories ultimately shape identities by defining roles and showing us what is possible or probable or EVEN available for our own particular identities. Those of us whose identities fall outside these written histories lack power and are consequently relinquished to the sidelines of history which she highlights in the last few lines of the poem: “a book of myths...in which our names do not appear”.

I share this excerpt with you because, for me, it underscores just how much words matter. Words reflect power structures, they convey emotions, they incite violence, they soothe others, they shape history, they build hope. We have a finite set of words that we can combine in an infinite number of ways to communicate with each other. The words that we speak, the words that we
write, including how we say them and write them can act as weapons to divide, intimidate, and harass, or serve as bridges to unite us, demonstrate compassion, and encourage collaboration.

When, 18 months ago, I stood before you, running for vice chair, I proposed that optimizing our seat at the table would involve effective communication, characterized by transparency and frequency, active faculty participation, and regular reflection on what shared governance meant in a dynamically changing environment. I wanted to consider how we as faculty could work together to meet our charge to “propose or adopt policies, regulations, and procedures intended to achieve the educational objectives of Purdue University and the general welfare of those involved in these educational processes” while simultaneously recognizing the constraints that limit this charge? That both faculty and administrators who have often taken up an “us versus them” or “negotiating adversaries” position needed to move in the space between us and recognize that our roles overlap and are mutually interdependent.

And certainly when I wrote those words, I had no idea that my time as senate chair would coincide with a pandemic. As an aside, I also didn’t realize that such a pandemic might have me counting the days until I relinquish this office and become past chair (it’s 260 days until then, by the way).

The summer has been an extraordinary time with, I believe, many instances where members of the Senate and faculty (along with other campus organizations) engaged in elements of shared governance and collaborative decision-making.

- As a senate, we were able to administer repeated surveys to ascertain faculty, staff, and student questions, concerns, and issues. Across the three waves, we received more than 21,000 responses! These responses informed the town halls the senate sponsored as well as the multiple conversations the Provost conducted across the summer. Beyond identifying topics for these town halls and conversations, we also produced multiple reports featuring the entire Purdue community as well as targeted reports by college when requested by leaders in the various colleges (available on the senate website). I will highlight some findings shortly. Finally, these surveys provided important data that were used to shape decisions and identify parts of campus where there were still significant questions or concerns.

- One direct result of comments and concerns raised in the Wave 1 survey was the formation of the Protect Purdue Leadership Group. This group was comprised of leaders from multiple organizations on campus including the senate, the Purdue Student Government, The Purdue Graduate Student Government, the Campus Support Staff Advisory Committee (CSSAC), and the Management and Professional Staff Advisory Committee (MaPSAC). We met weekly with Provost Akridge during the summer to raise concerns, share questions, and provide feedback on multiple policies and programs related to the Protect Purdue Implementation Team. We continue to meet every other week.

- Working with MaPSAC, we included questions on the third wave of the survey related to remote work needs and remote work benefits. We drafted a report specific to staff that included multiple ideas for enhancing everyone’s ability to work remotely and shared that
with leaders and decision-makers around campus including Bill Bell and HR, the Provost's Office, and others.
- Vice Chair Beaudoin and I along with relevant Senate committees and other faculty (especially EPC) reviewed draft documents related to teaching guidance, campus visitor policies, travel policies, exam policies, among multiple others.
- While some may disagree, I believe that the manner in which both the fall 2020 and the spring 2021 temporary calendars were set, with back and forth discussions between the provost's office and the EPC, were also examples of shared governance.

We have a lot going on right now. Our surveys highlight that we are all experiencing heightened stress and anxiety that, across the summer, worsened as the national situation worsened. Only 39% of us report we are getting enough high quality interactions with others. We have also found that faculty and graduate students especially report difficulty in shutting off from work, in getting everything that needs to be accomplished done, and in feeling equipped to adequately shift between work and personal life demands. Staff and students report heightened financial concerns along with concerns about keeping their jobs. Those of us who are parents raised concerns about child care options, especially if preK-12 schools shift to remote learning again.

In the midst of a pandemic with the multiple work and personal life pressures we are all facing, I think that, while there is certainly much more work and trust-building to do to reach the deep levels of collaboration around Purdue's strategic goals, aspirations, and challenges that we all want, I do want to acknowledge what has been completed this summer and do believe these interactions represent the beginning of more collaborative and transparent decision-making as it relates to Purdue and the general welfare of those involved in these educational processes.

To that end and to reflect back to my earlier comments about the power of the words we use, language matters. How we use language matters. Who we direct this language toward matters. Who we exclude with this language matters. Our country continues to experience incredible divisiveness stoked by powerful rhetoric and polarized message framing. In this time of COVID, we as Boilermakers must do better. Demonstrating compassion toward one another, finding common ground where we can, advocating for those we represent when necessary, and communicating with one another in mutually respectful ways, bare minimum levels of decency, these all are needed more than ever on this campus to continue to strengthen relationships, build consensus, and cultivate a shared sense of purpose across the broader Purdue community as we work to create a safe community filled with diverse perspectives.

Thank you.

Before we transition to the remarks from President Daniels, I want to alert you all that I have called a special session of the Senate that will be held on October 12th. This session is convened to review an internal discipline matter. More information will be forthcoming in an email later this week.