Transcript of Provost Nick Jones’ remarks to the Board of Trustees
Friday, February 24, 2017

Penn State Executive Vice President and Provost Nicholas P. Jones delivered his official Provost’s Report on Feb. 24 Board of Trustees meeting at The Penn Stater Hotel and Conference Center. Following is a transcript of his remarks.

Good afternoon. It's nice to be with you all today for the first official Board of Trustees meeting of 2017.

There is a lot of important work to be done, and together we will move forward vigorously in a variety of areas. One of those involves the ongoing implementation of LionPATH, our new student information system. I have some thoughts to share with you about this critical technological endeavor, as well as updates regarding our substantial progress on this University-wide project.

Before delivering my official report, however, I would like to take a moment to welcome two new Commonwealth Campus chancellors.

On January 16th, Vernon Dale Jones assumed his role as chancellor and chief academic officer at Penn State Wilkes-Barre. He succeeded Charles Davis, who retired after leading the Wilkes-Barre campus since March of 2006. Dr. Jones came to Penn State from Virginia's Hampden-Sydney College, where he served as vice president for strategy, administration, and board affairs.

Also, effective March 13th, M. Scott McBride will begin serving as chancellor and chief academic officer at Penn State DuBois. He will succeed Ping Werner, who has been
serving as interim chancellor since July 2016, when former Chancellor Melanie Hatch took a position at Middle Georgia State University. Dr. McBride is coming to Penn State from Kentucky’s Morehead State University, where he served as dean of the Caudill College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences.

We are fortunate to have such esteemed leaders as Drs. Jones and McBride joining the Penn State family.

Today, I would like to focus on the importance of change and forging a bold path. This concept is important across all facets of University operations, and I think we all would acknowledge how vital it is when it comes to how we use and leverage information technology. Advances in IT are occurring rapidly, and being “behind the times” is rarely if ever a good place to be.

Some IT-focused changes are relatively easy to implement and often go unnoticed, such as small upgrades to existing programs and services and security enhancements that typically occur behind the scenes.

Other changes, however, are bolder and more transformational, and they require intense focus and ample time to execute well. We pursue such initiatives because we must, and they are not nearly as easy. The efforts are typically large in scope and scale, and the work must be done while still managing daily operations effectively. Pursuing them requires courage, tenacity, and a willingness to tackle big challenges, knowing that the end results will be meaningful and impactful.

I was reminded of this when I listened to a report on NPR last month about a recent technological glitch affecting an airline’s operations. United Airlines said an IT issue had prevented pilots from getting information they needed to take off, like an aircraft’s weight and balance, so they could accurately calculate speed. Experts said the problem involved, once again, an archaic system that United uses to transmit data between aircraft and the airline’s operations center.
This IT issue resulted in flights being grounded for several hours and passengers standing around in lines like this.

It's not a good look, is it?

And yet these problems happen fairly frequently. A similar IT issue downed Delta’s systems for two days last summer, and another forced Southwest to cancel flights for a couple of days, too.

So, you might think, “Well, they just need to fix it. Make it work. Implement a new system.”

The problem is that airlines have long relied on old, legacy systems that now face even greater demands that they were never designed to handle. So, they are working on developing and eventually deploying new systems that can do the job. In the meantime, however, they still have vital operations to run, 24/7/365. They cannot simply flick a switch to shift from old to new.

And yet they must make changes – big, complex ones. So they have teams of thousands working on it, out of the public eye.

Here at Penn State, change is part of our institutional DNA. We make changes, large and small, virtually every day.

One of this university’s most transformational endeavors is Project LionPATH, the multi-year initiative to replace Penn State’s existing student information system across all of our campuses.

The previous homegrown system, ISIS, managed the processing of admissions applications, billing and accounts, financial aid awarding, course scheduling, transcripts,
and advising records for Penn State students. It also was the backbone of eLion, Penn State’s web-based access portal for students, faculty, and staff.

Much like with airlines and their legacy systems, universities like Penn State have theirs, too. And so we knew going in that we would face challenges in developing and implementing this new system while sunsetting the old ones. But we also knew that we needed to forge ahead, boldly, to bring this important change to fruition.

How immense and significant is this project? Consider that we held our official LionPATH kickoff event three years ago at what was then a new facility on Science Park Road, now called the Technology Support Building.

The Nittany Lion even made an appearance – chatting with Project LionPATH Director Michael Büsges.

Yes, it was a big day.

During the event, members of the LionPATH executive and steering committees toured the facility, met the many Project LionPATH team members. They left the gathering with an even better understanding of the immense amount of work that would be required to make Project LionPATH a success.

As executive sponsors of Project LionPATH, David Gray and I signed the project charter in March of 2014. The charter outlined the strategies and standards for achieving Project’s LionPATH's goals.

Here’s what I was quoted as saying at the time:

“I’ve seen the groundwork and great effort that has gone into getting us to this point. I’m supremely confident we are going to do this implementation in a manner that is not only going to be great for Penn State, but it is going to be a model to other institutions.”
As you all know, since that time, we have experienced challenges involving the development and deployment of LionPATH, and these issues understandably frustrated some faculty, staff, students, and parents.

As an executive sponsor of the project, I apologize for the difficulties some LionPATH users have experienced. We remain highly sensitive to these concerns and the importance of addressing them promptly.

Everyone involved with Project LionPATH has remained focused on delivering optimal results and superb service. And, were it not for their unwavering commitment, we might have faced additional challenges. Conversion of any major legacy database system is a tremendous undertaking, and everyone’s hard work throughout the multi-year process impeded and even neutralized potential complications.

I want to thank everyone who has worked on Project LionPATH. People from across the University, including volunteer committee members and staff assigned to the project for three years, have engaged in strategic meetings, system testing, writing documentation, and much more – all of which helped to bring this project to fruition. Thank you all for your dedication to not only Project LionPATH, but to Penn State.

And to Michael Büsges, Stephanie Szakal, Matt Scott, Kim Tremaglio, and others on the Project LionPATH team: Thank you. We could not have traveled this bold path without your committed leadership.

I would like to update you now regarding several key milestones we have achieved in the LionPATH implementation process, as well as alert you to some exciting things that are still to come.

The most notable milestone is that LionPATH became Penn State’s official student information system on August 29th of 2016. Because LionPATH’s rollout occurred in
phases, staff and students were still using ISIS and eLion for activities pertaining to the Spring and Summer 2016 academic terms.

For Fall 2016, however, everything was in LionPATH, and ISIS synchronization ended. That period – when we “flicked the switch,” so to speak – was difficult, as staff members responded to user queries and addressed complications as they surfaced. A “learning curve” was to be expected, but everyone stayed focused and pushed through it.

Now, initial deployment is complete for all system modules, including admissions, student records, advising, student billing, and financial aid. Most critical functionalities are operational whether you are using the LionPATH website or the mobile app.

We have also ramped up our communications related to LionPATH.

These efforts are designed to help all Penn State constituents understand how to use the system, as well as enable them to ask questions, get assistance, and recommend potential upgrades and innovations.

David Gray and I answered questions about LionPATH during a Town Hall meeting in University Park last September. Updates about LionPATH also are disseminated regularly through Strategic Communications, leveraging our many news vehicles and social media platforms to give the information a wide reach.

Occasionally, we will send out mass emails as deemed appropriate and necessary. We did this in August of 2016, to offer essential information shortly before LionPATH’s official launch date. We did so again earlier this week to provide updates about the system and to thank everyone for their continued support.

To read about the latest LionPATH news and updates, interested individuals can visit lionpathsupport.psu.edu. This website features a variety of useful information, including a method to report issues, submit help requests, and recommend system
improvements. It also includes a new viewable and searchable enhancement request list. We welcome users’ feedback, which will help to ensure LionPATH meets the needs of our students, faculty and staff.

The website soon will include regular reports containing LionPATH-related news and tips to help people use the system most efficiently.

So, what’s next for LionPATH?

A new permanent entity, the LionPATH Development and Maintenance Organization, will focus on enhancements to and stabilization of existing functionalities. In the coming months, we will remain focused on sustaining and improving LionPATH and delivering top-tier service to everyone who uses the system.

The LDMO is already working on improvements to the system’s reporting capabilities and development of a more intuitive and visually engaging user interface. That is one area where we have heard students’ concerns, in particular, and we are addressing them.

Next month, we expect to begin beta testing the new interface with a cross-section of students from throughout the University. Pending the results of that six-week process, we hope to roll out the new interface to all students in May.

We recently launched a new “LionPATH Student Updates” website to help everyone stay informed about the beta testing process. It can be found at: sites.psu.edu/lionpathstudentupdates.

The image shown here is a mockup of what the LionPATH home page might look like to a student user in the new interface.
This image shows a “Student Center” page as it might appear in LionPATH’s new interface, on the left, compared to the current system view, on the right.

We are confident that the advance work on this part of the project, combined with several weeks of beta testing by current students, will result in the launch of an interface that users will find easy to navigate.

So, LionPATH is up and running, with further enhancements on the horizon.

But that’s not all.

We have learned a lot through our work on Project LionPATH – and that has made us even more confident in our efforts to replace other antiquated systems.

Penn State is in the midst of one of the largest and most impactful Human Resources transformations in its history. This endeavor includes changes to the technology employees will use to manage their benefits, performance, time off, and payment elections, among other self-service actions.

The Human Resources Business Process Transformation, our initiative to create a more agile, self-service HR model, will include the creation and launch of WorkLion.

This new online employee portal will house tools such as a searchable HR knowledge base, access to the Learning Resource Network, and the University’s new cloud-based HR and payroll system, which is called Workday.

Project WorkLion kicked off in May of 2015, and most employees across Penn State will begin using Workday in June of this year. Designated “WorkLion Ambassadors” will assist people in their units, colleges, and departments as they prepare for the transition to Workday.
This is yet another enormous undertaking, but like Project LionPATH, it is a necessary one.

I’d like to thank Susan Basso and Joe Doncsecz for their leadership, and everyone on the WorkLion team for shepherding this project to completion.

This project is in its infancy, and requirements for the new system are still in development. Initial planning calls for a project launch in early 2018, with deployment of a new financial system anticipated in 2020.

To conclude my remarks today, I want to show you this quote.

I find it appropriate and accurate in its description of transformational changes – the types of projects and initiatives that require us to forge bold paths and to engage in smart, thoughtful risk-taking to achieve meaningful outcomes.

Change is hard at first. And yes, it can get messy in the middle. But in the end, bold change-oriented processes enable us to achieve extraordinary results that have positive impacts across the University.

Thank you for your time today and your continued support. I now welcome your questions or comments.

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