



Office of the President

A Message from
President Adela de la Torre, Ph.D.

Honorary Doctor Degree by Tbilisi State University
SDSU President Adela de la Torre
Monday, May 30, 2022/Tbilisi, Georgia

Good morning, everyone.

It is wonderful to be back in Georgia and reconnect with so many good friends and trusted colleagues...

Rector Sharva-shidze [Shahr-vah-shih-dze], Dr. Asatiani, Dean Guven, friends ... and other distinguished guests...

Receiving this degree... and your recognition, in particular, means a great deal to me.

First, as a lifelong educator, I am honored and humbled...

When I look back at what led me to my path to becoming a President of a major university like SDSU...

I have to reflect on the values...instilled in me since childhood.

My mother, a teacher and educator herself...and my grandmother...both taught me to use everything and imagine the beauty you can create.

That even with few resources, if you have the determination...the imagination...the creativity and vision...and most of all the *education*....then your future is unlimited.

My world was not immune from pain or suffering, but there was such a deep mantle of love, generosity, and faith in this pathway...

In the transformative power of education...

that it allowed me to believe in myself and my capacity for a different future.

It is why I chose to teach at...and later become a leader in higher education and eventually become a president of...a public university.

It is through public universities that...
providing access is paramount. But so is excellence.
Nowhere else is this balance reached like it is at public research universities.

Like San Diego State University.
Like Tbilisi State University.

We are both the oldest universities in our regions, both more than a century old.

We are both defined by who we serve and our belief in the transformative power of an education...

Of the highest possible quality...and also by our global collaborative view.

Tbilisi State University has granted honorary degrees to prime ministers, presidents of nations, leading scientists, educators, trailblazers, and others helping to make the WORLD a better place.

Not just Georgia. Not just Tbilisi. But innovators and leaders who looked at education as an unrivaled tool for *global* betterment.

Which, in my view, is exactly the calling card of all great institutions of higher learning.

And soI am honored to receive this recognition not because of anything I may have done... but because receiving this degree speaks volumes about the strength of our partnership.

And the strength...and truth...of our shared mission. Today underscores the mutual trust we have been building since I became President of San Diego State University four years ago... when I became involved in this wonderful partnership.

I am also happy to tell you that this year marks the 4th time I have been able to travel to this proud nation

To participate in both convocation and commencement ceremonies for the outstanding graduates of SDSU Georgia.

I still remember when I arrived with anticipation for my first time in Georgia in the Fall of 2018 as a new President...

Learning about a project in which my knowledge was limited...

But where the leadership of our Georgian partners and Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) allowed me to see the vision for this important project.

The first of its kind by the MCC...

... with the expectation that we would show the world that we could accelerate STEM education through a different model of transformative learning with joint faculty partnerships—

Where the transfer of skills and physical capital would occur with our sister Georgian institutions ...

Which would create long term sustainability and growth of STEM education in key Georgian institutions of Higher Education

Including:

Tbilisi State University,

Ilia State University

and Georgian Technical University

in 6 core areas- Chemistry/Biochemistry, Computer Science, Computer Engineering, Civil Engineering, Construction Engineering, and Electrical Engineering,

What is remarkable to me is as we approach the end of this year, we are clearly on track to meeting this goal ...

Not only in the transfer of knowledge, but in the preparation and success of these great institutions meeting the highest standards of professional accreditation in their STEM degree programs, which include ABET (Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology) and ACS (American Chemical Society).

In line with this vision of sustainability, there was also the goal to produce the next generation of STEM leaders with SDSU...

Through this joint educational venture, the best and the brightest students in Georgia would have the opportunity to transform their lives through the best STEM educational programs we could offer...

And this goal too was easily met through the great teamwork of our Georgian staff who reached out throughout the country...

To introduce the importance of STEM education to students in the Georgian High schools...

The unique opportunity for these joint degrees with SDSU was at first viewed with uncertainty, but soon after became viewed as a prized opportunity for Georgian students across the country.

...

What is critical to understand is that this collaborative grassroots approach transformed the perspective of Georgian students and their families toward the value and importance of a STEM degree. This is especially true and noteworthy for the young women of Georgia, who had not been allowed many opportunities like this, before SDSU.

Since 2015, we have graduated more than 400 students from our SDSU Georgia programs. More importantly, this year's graduating class of 160 students will be 45% women---- a remarkable accomplishment not only for Georgia, but also, a remarkable feat for any nation in the world where gender equity in STEM education is too rarely achieved, nor often lauded.

Together with our Georgian higher education partners, we are educating the next generation of scientific innovators, technology leaders, entrepreneurs, and engineers.

One of these incredible graduates – Nino Kacharava [Neeh-noh Kah-tchah-rah-vah] will be speaking at the Commencement Ceremony tomorrow. She is the personification of this SDSU Georgia project, countering the stereotype of women in Engineering, by following her passion to become a Civil Engineer...

Nino has managed to seize every opportunity, given to her by SDSU...

By engaging in campus activities...

Serving as a Vice President of the Associated Students Board...

And finally, securing a prestigious fellowship for a Ph.D. degree in Civil and Environmental Engineering at Cornell University.

Nino and hundreds more like her will continue putting their SDSU Degrees, earned in Georgia, to good use...

to not only make a mark in their own STEM careers...

transforming their own lives and that of their families...

but also serving as global ambassadors.

They are experts not just in their fields of study, but in HOW they were taught.

They can speak... firsthand... to the democratic principles of the Georgian people.

About having a voice with value and weight... and USING that voice to shape their country's future.

They can speak for the power of partnership and collaboration... the coming together of many voices... not the silencing of many to the will of one.

Like Nino Maka-sara-shvili [Neeh-noh Mah-kah-sah-rah-shvee-lee], another graduate of SDSU Georgia, who has raised her voice in favor of equal opportunity before...

Who has revived the Empower Women Club at SDSU Georgia...

To encourage girls, passionate about science and engineering...
To become a role model for them...

By reaching high school students all around Georgia...

By speaking at STEM events and conferences about what it means to be a woman in STEM...

To quote her: "if we, women in STEM, can inspire at least one woman to follow her passion and become a scientist or engineer, we will go there".

Nino will continue her studies in the graduate program in Chemistry at SDSU Main Campus next year. After that, she will come back to Georgia to continue inspiring women and to create a better future for the generations after her.

These alums of the SDSU Georgia Program are a testament to the powerful impact of this collaborative model...

And nowhere else is this type of practice more present than in public higher education. It is here where the transformation of leadership is truly most profound... Not in business...not in government.

Frankly, not even in K-12.

Too often these sectors are still embedded with hierarchies... or hobbled by restrictions that limit critical discourse and ideas.

But in higher education...while still not perfect...there is a pride in shared governance.

That expertise and collaboration... above all else are to be prized, if it allows for the advancement of knowledge and the sharing of that knowledge.

When you are at the cutting edge...there are no known right answers.

What we value is the pursuit of knowledge. More often the debate.

More minds all pushing for better answers, no matter your title or family history or background.

We look to model that ideal every day.

And we look to teach it to our students, so they know that asking the *Why* is as important, or even more important than the answer.

To seek to improve, and to speak. To partner... collaborate... share... and be at the table.

I am an economist. In many respects, we often can be blinded by measures of economic growth, productivity and wealth when we define standards of living....

But in reality... what is even more critical are those measures that combine these economic measures with social equity measures of success for a society and a country...

You can have a democratic economic development model, or you can have an autocratic economic development model.

You can have a society that is identified by its concentration of wealth in the hands of a few, or a distribution of wealth in a more egalitarian fashion...

Capitalism can, frankly, flourish under both situations.

But when it is operating under the former...when it is allowed to run away with itself...influenced by as few voices as possible...or as few industries as possible...it will never enrich the people whom it is meant to serve. It might enrich the country. But it will not enrich the people.

This is not a guaranteed problem of capitalism. But it is a risk. However, when industry and government are forged with a deep commitment to education—particularly PUBLIC, accessible education...and public, accessible HIGHER education ...

You are investing in generations of people who now have a voice. Who have the ability and desire to be at the table.

Who will begin to pose these thorny questions of social equity, social justice and equitable distribution...

These students are not so willing to give up on challenging the status quo and re-imagining a better future ...

It is in this critical synergy of institutions and systems that a more democratic economic development model can flourish and thrive and where a people and a country can BOTH thrive.

I look at what I have learned about the history of Georgia. It is a country that has endured so much and yet has continued to thrive. It has so much to offer its people and the world. From the time of your legendary Queen Tamar to right now, the Georgian people have been strong, resilient, and committed to determining their own destiny.

What is remarkable to me is that as compared to the young United States, Georgia has the impressive legacy of establishing a comprehensive and sophisticated educational system well before most nation-states.

Indeed, as early as the 4th Century, Georgia developed a network of church-based schools throughout the country. And by the 11th century established its first universities. Thus, the fortitude and commitment to public education in Georgia are remarkable.

It is through Georgia's deep commitment to education that as President of SDSU, I am also deeply committed to expanding these opportunities even further through our collaboration.

Universities like TSU, moreover, have a global vision that further accelerates the possibility of global partnerships...

And, SDSU certainly shares this vision and aspires to continue this partnership with you...

And collaboration is central to that commitment.

As all of you know, we gather here today at another perilous moment in history. The pandemic and the terrible events and continuing carnage in Ukraine have tested our faith and resolve.

Civil civic discourse has almost become an endangered species in America and around the world.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is the ultimate personification of that – where differences might once have been solved by talking, negotiating, and showing some form of mutual respect and empathy for each side. But not today.

This is our current state of affairs. We see it in every corner of the globe, and it has become a pathology in the United States as well.

No one has any simple answers or quick fixes to get us all back on the right track.

Instead, it seems to become which leader—which single voice—would we rather hear and believe?

We may be able to identify the problem... but as of yet have not found the solution... and this is where to my mind universities can provide a central role...

With academic freedom and free speech,...where students learn to think critically, and where faculty encourage students in a robust but respectful debate – this is the best hope for developing the kind of solutions to vexing social problems...

We also can create the type of inclusive, and equitable society we aspire for ourselves, for our children and for our countries. Yet this will require us all to give more people the tools to engage in this debate...not fewer. Access to more not less public higher education, of all peoples...of all backgrounds. This is the promise and success of the partnership we have developed together with SDSU Georgia...

And this is only the beginning... we can do much more..

Together we can model the impact of educational democracy and diplomacy as an under-appreciated but high-impact strategy to deepen state alliances and improve people's lives.

This year marks three decades of diplomatic relations between the United States and Georgia. Through this long friendship, the United States and Georgia have...together...strengthened democracy and addressed economic challenges.

San Diego State University's programs in Georgia, implemented through the Millennium Challenge Compact grant and with the help of the Georgian government, are a prime example of the expansion of this unique partnership between Georgia and the United States.

Today, we are witness to the success of educational democracy and diplomacy in Georgia as a model for the future.

Indeed, tomorrow we will witness the grand vision for global betterment...with a major celebration for 160 Georgian families celebrating the success of their children.

Our newly minted STEM professionals...scientists and engineers...will graduate and join the workforce in this country. In their co-curricular activities, they have engaged in student government and created new associations such as Empower Women to enhance shared governance and address social equity issues in Georgia.

With SDSU degrees, they are equipped with contemporary skills, strong voices, and ready to contribute to the future of their homeland and world.

Already, our alums are mentoring young students to explore STEM and to overlook challenges by providing them with pathways for success. Because they are engaged in civic life at a local

level, they are preparing themselves for their future leadership roles in industry, education, and government in Georgia.

SDSU is on track to graduate more than 500 local students in Georgia by 2023, and they will continue contributing to the bright future of the country, putting our highest international standards of education to good use.

Our partnership is a model for showing what can happen when countries and institutions put students and society at large at the forefront. It is a model of the importance of building something collaboratively, finding a middle ground, with mutual respect, to accelerate the pathways for higher education to the best and brightest students in Georgia... Without consideration of class, ethnic identity or gender.

This is indeed a remarkable achievement.

I have no doubt that together, we can change lives and can change the trajectories of nations.

These students are vitally important for the future of Georgia, just as they are vitally important for the United States.

Their transformation through our educational partnership provides hope and a future for this great nation and the world.

Public universities are the ideal platform to debate and interrogate the big issues of the day. From safe water and clean air to climate change, immigration and on and on.

My own strongly held belief is that without social equity and the right approach to economic development, civic engagement, and democracy, you cannot have a true society... Where people are free to realize their potential.

The road may be long and it may be difficult, but through educational democracy and diplomacy, we can educate more young people through partnerships like the one built on trust between San Diego State and our Georgian partners.

The famous U.S. civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stated, that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

I believe that this statement is as true today as it was more than 50 years ago.

As we continue to build on our educational partnership, let’s keep in mind Dr. King’s prescient words... that we must always bend toward the direction of justice, democracy, and opportunity for all. For this will be our greatest legacy for generations to come.

Thank you again for this great honor that you have bestowed on me...

And thank you all for your ongoing commitment to the transformative power of education.

We have living proof of its value in our exceptional graduates, who I know will take all they have learned and experienced and put it to use for the greater good...That is the most gratifying result educators can hope for ...

On behalf of my colleagues at San Diego State, we are extremely proud to be your partners and hope to be for many years to come. Thank you.