It is an honor to be speaking today at the investiture of Dr. Suresh Garimella, the 27th President of the University of Vermont. Let me recognize the faculty, staff, and students of the University here, as well as Dr. Garimella’s family, friends, and colleagues. This is an important day for everyone who has been part of Dr. Garimella’s journey. It’s an opportunity to look forward to a new era with his presidency.

For a long time, I have been a student of institutions and what makes them successful. From institutions the size of a department or center to the size of an entire university — or even a country — what stands out as the principal ingredient for success for all is leadership.

You are very fortunate. The University of Vermont has found a great leader in Suresh Garimella. Let me tell you about my first encounter with him.

At the time I was President of Purdue. I saw that the Engineering School was featuring a special lecture by one of its faculty who had just returned from serving a year in Washington, DC as a Jefferson fellow at the State Department. I was eager to learn more about the benefits and insights gained from this appointment and made time in my schedule to attend the lecture. Suresh, of course, was the speaker.
I was impressed by his thoughtful analysis of his year with our State Department, what he had learned about international diplomacy and the relevance of science and technology to economic growth, our nation’s science portfolio, and foreign affairs. I thought to myself, “there’s a person we could use in the office of the Purdue President.” And, next thing I knew, Suresh was on our leadership team. My successor at Purdue recognized his talent and drive, and made him Executive Vice President for Research and Partnerships. In that role, Suresh increased the research portfolio of the university tremendously and formed several stunning partnerships with industry. Now, the University of Vermont has recognized these achievements and the character that drove them, and made him President. You are fortunate, indeed.

Dr. Garimella is stepping up at an important time for higher education, perhaps even a defining moment in our history. This mirrors a time in American history in the 1800s when the effects of the Industrial Revolution were transforming society. There was an urgent need for educational opportunities that would give people the knowledge and skills they needed to navigate new frontiers in manufacturing, engineering, and agriculture.

That led to the creation of the land-grant university system in 1862. The University of Vermont became part of that nationwide system, and as a former chancellor and president of two land grant universities, I have seen close-hand how a land-grant university connects to the wider community. I can only imagine that you too are proud of your land grant tradition.
The frontiers of science and engineering have expanded far beyond what anyone could have imagined in the mid-1800s, and the roles of education and research have become even more important. The University of Vermont once prepared students for the Industrial Revolution, and now it will prepare students for the Artificial Intelligence revolution, the quantum computing revolution, the bio-engineering revolution, and many more groundbreaking opportunities that science, technology, and engineering have made possible.

And, lest you think I am talking only about science and engineering, this age also demands a revolution in creativity, in combining scientific and humanistic traditions in new ways to encourage creativity and innovation. It demands the skills of social and behavioral scientists to help ensure an ethical framework for how new technologies are used.

One of the hallmarks of Suresh’s career has been his interdisciplinary approach to both science and administration. The lines between different fields in science and engineering are blurring more and more every day and bigger breakthroughs are now made possible by cross-cutting collaborations.

This approach is becoming one of the defining characteristics of today’s successful and productive endeavors. The “coming together” or “convergence” of disciplines, of science and humanistic approaches, introduces new perspectives and generates new ways to solve even the most difficult questions.
At Purdue, Suresh conceived and implemented an ambitious Life Sciences Initiative, in which he brought together faculty from many disciplines to study integrative neuroscience and inflammation, immunology and infectious disease. He also assisted a new Integrative Data Science Initiative, which applied data science research to pressing fundamental and socially relevant issues. This was important to prepare students for the future.

I’m excited for what the future holds as your new president, Suresh Garimella, enables the convergence of ideas and people that are the heart of the University of Vermont. Congratulations to Suresh, and congratulations to all of you!

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