

Our House of Higher Education

Community Development Roundtable
Seattle, November 2, 2009
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I want to take you inside the house of higher education as I know it. In order to do so I must first bring light into that house by opening some windows and then as a 12-year president lead you through the front door and show you around a house which is most interesting for students, for our community, and for our future.

The first window I open is the window of the tradition of Jesuit higher education. It was the first international system of colleges and universities, begun in Sicily in 1546 by the very first band of Jesuit priests, so it is a mere 463 years old. Jesuit universities remain today the only truly international system of higher education in the world, on all continents, in more than 50 countries, with over 150 universities. In the United States there are 28 Jesuit universities, such as Georgetown, Boston College, Fordham, Marquette, St. Louis, Santa Clara, Gonzaga, Seattle. Some have defined Jesuit universities as “Universities of high academic quality with great basketball teams!” We have half of that at S.U. and are going for the other half!

Let me unlatch a second window: higher education in the State of Washington. We are part of broad array of research and regional universities, independent colleges and universities, 32 community colleges and technical schools, and specialized art, professional, for-profit colleges of the state. We are all different and we are all needed for what we offer for the sake of students’ needs of education, as well as the needs of our cities and communities, businesses, health and social services, and the families and wellbeing of the citizenry of our state. We are not in competition with one another as educational institutions. As private or public institutions we support one another, are served by one another, need one another, and our students most of all need us all to flourish. We don’t live in the shadow of one another. We collaborate. We each try to do what we do best for those who need us most.

My third window is not as small a window as some might think: the light shining into the house of higher education by the ten, full-scope, liberal-arts-based independent colleges and universities of the state: Seattle U., Seattle Pacific, Pacific Lutheran, Puget Sound, St. Martins, Heritage, Gonzaga, Whitworth, Whitman, and Walla Walla. They are a consortium known as ICW—the Independent Colleges of Washington—and work very closely together. These ten independents have 40,000 students, save the state \$343 million annually in what the state would otherwise need to provide in tuition alone for Washington state students served in our classrooms rather than in state schools, bestow nearly 25% of all bachelor and graduate degrees in the state, 36% of the education degrees, and 39% of nursing degrees. They do all of this without receiving any money from the state, though the state allows students to take need grants, educational opportunity grants, and work-study grants to any college of their choice. Thus for an investment of less than 2% of the state’s annual higher education budget, the state helps make possible this

very large part of higher education in Washington through some financial aid to its student citizens.

The last window is the most important one: today's college students themselves. We depend completely for what we do on the health of early learning and K-12 education. In the State of Washington today, if you take 100 students in 9th grade, only 69 of them will graduate on time from high school, 33 of those will go to some form of college, 24 of them will still be in college in their second year, and only 17 will graduate with an associate degree after three years or a bachelor degree after six years. That is the pipeline and it is not encouraging. We need to educate students ready for college-level studies. Our universities do not do remedial education, though we provide every possible help for the willing student to learn, to succeed, and to graduate. College today is tough, and a university like Seattle U. is proud when there is a 90% continuation rate from freshman to sophomore year, and a 73% six-year graduation rate from our university of students who came to us as freshmen. The students we see are increasingly diverse and multiracial, hopeful and even docile, strongly committed to service, proudly global citizens, much younger developmentally and more capable of being formed in values than they appear to be, quite unsure or fluctuating about what they want to major in, almost all working part-time, dependent on loans, highly sophisticated technologically, but weak in reading, writing, and analytical abilities, and almost without exception simply fun, generous, and good persons.

We are now ready to step in the front door of this house of higher education. Let me open the door and show you around. You should know something about me before you step inside with me. I grew up in the territory of Alaska. My Dad was one of the authors of Alaska's State Constitution. I have never known a day in my life, from my first memory on, when I did not want to be a priest: you could say it was God calling me or my Catholic Mom's sacrificing the last of her three sons on the altar of a Catholic family's expectation in those days to produce a priest. In any case, it fit and I've never doubted it: I love it; it is my identity; who I am; and it's remarkably easy for me to figure out what I'm going to wear to work each morning! Growing up, I bumped into the Jesuits in Alaska and my priestly vocation transmogrified into the dream of being "a dogsled priest in Northern Alaska", mushing my team across the frozen tundra under the Aurora Borealis to bring the sacraments to a dying Eskimo elder in a remote village. "Mush, you Huskies!" (When you think of it, it would have been better for a president of the University of Washington to have had that dream!) So I am a Catholic priest, a Jesuit educator, and someone who thrills to a great adventure. I step into the house of higher education as much as a priest and a Jesuit as I do as a president. They shape the way I act as a president and the vantage point from which I see higher education. Let me show you around the house of higher education.

This is a big house and a costly one. Mine has 7,751 students, 2,126 new one just this fall, 2000 graduating each year. There are traditional undergraduate, transfer, graduate, and law students, all served by 1,283 faculty and staff, across eight colleges and schools in a total of 92 degree programs, with dozens of student services, nearly 200 clubs; 1,800 students living on campus; needing the latest and the best in technology; new libraries and learning commons; admissions and financial aid offices; alumni programs; fitness, recreation, dining and sports faculties; student centers with massive dining areas; coffee shops; study areas; thousands of parking spots; subsidized public transportation; a community engagement center to link with 100 partner agencies in order to provide a service-learning component integrated into more than 200 courses; a required Jesuit education core curriculum; advising centers; health-wellness-counseling centers; career counseling and placement professionals; intercollegiate athletics; a Jesuit community of 25; a communication and marketing division; deans; a fundraising operation; administrators; an alumni association serving 62,000 graduates; advisory boards; trustees, and... oh yes...; a Jesuit Catholic priest-president.

I know that if you explore this house, go everywhere in it, you will know from the inside why higher education is necessarily costly and why costs go up driven by always better professors and personnel, new technologies, facilities, services, increased in effect by what higher education has become and by what it is expected to deliver. To offset the real cost of education, we restrain costs, find efficiencies, make our way through recessions, and go flat out in fundraising—such as our just-completed, record \$169 million campaign, raising \$541,000 every week for six years straight. We provide massive amounts of financial aid targeted principally at the neediest students. We are blessed with such programs as the Costco Scholarship Fund, the Fostering Scholars program, the Achievers Scholars through the College Success Fund, to give deserving underrepresented minority students, or foster kids, or first-generation students access to and success in our kind of education. With all that we do to offset costs, still 80 cents on every dollar of our \$173 million budget comes from tuition paid by our students and their families. That's why our tuition needs to be \$29,340 a year while the average amount paid by students after financial aid which Seattle U. provides is \$17,691 a year. The total cost of tuition, room, board, books, transportation, and miscellaneous for an undergraduate living on campus we calculate to be \$43,498. With the amount of aid given by SU what the actual average of total out of pocket costs for a student per year is \$18,746. They graduate with an average indebtedness of \$20,000. We think that is a very good deal.

Yes, it's a costly house but it's worth it. First of all, as the almost universally required ticket to get a job which can support a livelihood and/or a family, a way into a career which on average earns well over a million dollars more than the person with the high school degree. We believe it is well worth it and more than worth it as an investment in a life of purpose, of meaning, of value, of service, of understanding and ongoing education, of informed and participatory citizenship, of care, of human depth and multicultural sensitivity, cultural and artistic appreciation, commitment, community, educated global solidarity, justice, spirituality, faith, and love. You can't put a price-tag on any of these. In the critically-formative college and graduate years of students, the right kind of house of higher education can welcome and support and nurture persons who will live lives of this human depth and societal service.

From a more personal perspective let me tell you how I look on my experience in the house of higher education. As my predecessor, Fr. Bill Sullivan, who during twenty years laid the foundations of a university on which I have been able to build, used to love to say, “Being a university president is less like being the CEO of a corporation and more like being the mayor of a city”. I agree. If you want constituencies, and politics, and slow consultative processes, try working with and somewhat adequately responding all at the time to students, alumni, faculty, staff, donors, trustees, business leaders, foundations, accrediting agencies, neighborhood organizations, federal, state and city entities, wild sports fans, and in my case the Catholic Church and fellow Jesuits with whom I live as just one guy in the community. I learned long ago that this was what I most found satisfaction in: providing leadership and animation in a mission-driven context which called on every possible ability, gift, or skill I had or could learn to have. In my case it called me to be true to being a deeply prayerful person, trusting in God’s help and presence in the thick and wonder of it all. It even—on most days—beats being a dogsled priest in Northern Alaska.

It took me five full years to be president in my own Jesuit, priestly, pastoral, Alaskan way. It took that long to get my “I” and the job’s “it” together. What came from it was a genuine closeness to and fondness of students. I am 66, but don’t feel it for a moment and I am convinced the students keep me young. I talk to every student I see if I can get their attention and get them to pull the iPod from their ears. I learn from them what it is we actually teach, who are the best teachers, who are the snoozers, which major they are currently exploring, what they plan for the weekend, what their truest commitments are, how long they plan to live off and travel off Mom and Dad, what they take for granted about gender identity and relationships, about their great cause of sustainability, why Barack Obama deserved the Nobel Peace Prize, what internships and job opportunities they have, what’s right and wrong with the Catholic Church, and how I should loosen up and get a life. I think they learn something from me about joyful leadership and easy access to a somewhat normal priest and college president. On the very rare occasion they see me on campus not wearing my usual black and white clerical suit, students are taken aback and exclaim, “Wow, it’s you, Fr. Steve; I didn’t recognize you; you look normal!”

Last week a sophomore named Katie, with an unpronounceable Polish name beginning with “W”, from Wasilla, Alaska, made an appointment to see me. She is majoring in Strategic Communications and Public Affairs and wants to go into urban planning and politics. I didn’t ask her—because of her being from Wasilla—either who inspired her political ambitions nor whether she could see Russia from her backyard. Katie came to see me about the Residence Hall Councils on campus of which she is president. I made the mistake of telling her that if there was ever any event she wanted me to attend I’d be glad to if I could. She replied, “Great, tomorrow—a Saturday—we have what we call ‘Hallympics’, fun competitions between the five residence halls such as Frisbee tossing, tug-a-war, a pie eating contest, and we’d really like to have you join the pie eating contest.” I could just see that! I asked rather presidentially “When is it?” Katie said, “At 4:30.” I responded, even more presidentially, “I’m afraid I can’t make it because of other appointments.” She replied; “Sure Father, an appointment at 4:30 on a Saturday! Very likely! I’d say you can only claim you have an appointment at 4:30 on Saturday if you have an appointment at 5:00 to go to confession!” Two conclusions: 1) now there is a real Catholic student; 2) Keep your eye out for Katie W. from Wasilla on the national scene! I’d

like to think there is a third conclusion: Katie's easy job at me shows it makes a difference being a priest-president, a difference which is both good for me and how I lead S.U. and very good for Katie and her classmates in the residence halls.

I'm quite at home in this house of higher education, especially in my house, though I think each college or university is its own house with its own layout and furnishings. I think I'm a long-termer. Fr. Sullivan was the 20th president and served for 20 years; I'm the 21st and don't see why I can't do 21 years, especially if there are a lot of Katies around. This longevity runs deep in president's offices at several of our independent colleges: Loren Anderson of PLU is in his 18th year; Kathleen Ross of Heritage University in Toppenish in her 26th and last year; Bill Robinson of Whitworth turning over the reins after 17 years; Phil Eaton of Seattle Pacific is going strong in his 16th year. Why is that? I think it is because each of us has a deeper purpose, which is a religious propose, for why we are doing what we are doing as presidents, all of us are pastoral in our manner with students, faculty, and staff rather than overly official, and each of us drinks from the wellspring of an educational mission which has nothing to do with career, advancement, moving on up the ladder, but has everything to do with helping students find their calling, their competence, their conscience, and their compassion in order to make a difference in the world. That keeps us going and allows a joyful leadership for long years.

This house of higher education—or these houses of higher education—each has a rather fixed arrangement of furniture and decoration. You move things around at your peril! Each has a woven strand of traditions of how things are done and of what the college is really like, what its sense of community is, what it most prizes, etc. Someone told me recently, “It is easier to move a graveyard than to change a college.” That may be going too far, but not much too far. I've come to believe that there is nothing stronger, more persistent, more impactful, resistant to change, undying and yet life-giving, than a tradition. This is true in all areas: corporate life, ethnic and cultural traditions, civic traditions, sports traditions, Seafair traditions and Ivar's traditions, family traditions. Traditions are tenacious and they are important. A university, perhaps more than any other institution in America, is a tapestry of traditions; it's what we foster and it's why alumni keep connected, are loyal, and give. If you want to move the graveyard, change the college, don't fool around with conceptual stuff, tackle the traditions.

Could this have anything to do, by chance, with why Seattle U., with its once strong and still very much alive tradition of basketball, just happens to be going to Division One of the NCAA, is now in the Key Arena, on the “Elgin Baylor basketball floor” as its home court, has hired a Cameron Dollar and a Joan Bonvicini as coaches, and has locked in a 5-year HEC Ed/Key Arena away and home cross-town rivalry with the Huskies? Why not be D-I in everything; academics, service, professional formation, campus facilities (with that \$56 million new Library and Learning Commons going up), values, spirituality and intercollegiate sports? I—who am not known for being a particularly athletic guy—am out not to move the graveyard but to resurrect the tradition so that it's consistent with the quality of all we do and a new window into our house. I'm told I'm the only university president in the country ever to take the same school from D-3, to D-2, to D-1 in the NCAA. There's “the dogsled priest” coming out in me! Get your season tickets now, because you won't be able to get them in five years. You need to know, the Jesuits did not pray the Sonics out of town to make room for Seattle U. Redhawks in The Key. We are good, but not that good!

Our house of higher education—and any house of higher education—does not sit in a vacant lot or out in the country. It is a house in a city, in a neighborhood, part of the fabric of a community, surrounded by and connected with people, their lives and their businesses. Our university already has a \$580 million annual economic impact on our city and region, and our students, faculty, and staff work 185,000 hours annually in service to our community, work valued at \$7 million a year. We partner with more than 100 community organizations. We have a rating of 97 out of a possible 99 points on the Princeton Review’s 2009 Green Rating of colleges and universities. You’d think our school color was not Redhawk red but Irish green! Our Colleges of Nursing and Education are celebrating their 75th anniversaries, having educated 3,800 currently active nurses and graduated 11,000 educators, among them 91 superintendents, and 485 principals. You’ll find our law alums everywhere, since we educate half the lawyers in our state. Look into the professions, businesses, social services and you’ll find SU interns and alums serving everywhere.

But this is not enough. When I first started as president of SU I tried to make the following motto stick: “Seattle University is Seattle’s university!” Not catchy enough, but it is still what I want and where we are going as a university. Hosting “Tent City” as the first university to ever do so anywhere gave us an experience of all doing a common thing together and learning about homelessness from it. Integrating community-based service learning into hundreds of courses moved us forward and developed our community partnerships. Opening our university, our house of higher education, so that it faces onto 12th Avenue and welcomes our neighbors, invites community connection and use of our campus. The backing of key donors and believers in serving the community through the unique resource of a university now inspires us. Most of all firmly believing that a Jesuit education today—as in its 463-year history—must be an education not only connected to but done in and with the places and people of the real issues of communities confirms where we now see we must go. It is time for us to open our house and to engage in a university-wide, coordinated way in partnership with the communities nearest to us who best know their own needs, and it is time to welcome these communities into our house and one day their youth into the classrooms of our house of higher education. Look for these exciting developments.

Let me conclude by highlighting what I’ve said as priest-president of a Jesuit university, one of the ten private universities making an often unrecognized contribution to the education of the students of our state in collaboration with our public partners and depending on a healthy K-12 system.

- Our education is costly—even with significant financial aid—but our students and their lives of work, service, and meaning are worth it.
- You want our kind of graduates working in your business, serving your customers, and shaping your future with the competence and the values they’ve learned with us.
- Long-serving presidents have great missions, often religious ones, and are kept young and kept focused on educational mission by keeping close to the students.

- All universities, like all good corporations, have strong traditions; we are made up of a fabric of traditions and are out to rebuild one of ours in the Key Arena.
- At the end of the day you are invited to measure our university by how much it serves you, our community. We welcome your evaluation of us.
- Being the president of Seattle University is, as I hope you have picked up, the best job, bar none, in Seattle, and I look forward to keeping on mushing.