

President's Welcome 2020

- September 3, 2020

- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

Let me begin by saying that, like you, my thoughts and prayers and support are with all of our community and their loved ones who have been more directly impacted in health and wellbeing by the crisis we are living and and I join with you in gratitude for the first responders, nurses, doctors, scientists – some of whom are our own alumni – who work tirelessly to take care of all of us.

Welcome to the Fall 2020 convocation for faculty and staff as we begin this year together. What a year it will be! Welcome especially to new colleagues, faculty and staff. Welcome to all – and it is all of us – who have prepared for this unprecedented year: reopening task force; faculty designing new online courses; advisors lining up our students for a new way of education; admissions, registrar, and financial aid teams who have found new and creative ways to reach out to students; welcome to coaches and trainers and athletic leaders without a season of competition but with 325 student-athletes on campus; welcome to deans overseeing schools and colleges; welcome to staff doing the hard work of making it all possible; welcome to facilities, grounds, maintenance fashioning a safe campus; welcome to health center and Campus Public Safety for looking after the wellbeing of our whole community; welcome to our professional teams in HR, and communications and marketing, more vital than ever in these times; welcome to residential and student life colleagues who have such tough jobs for making this year work;

welcome to the Cabinet who have sought to enable others in meeting all our challenges. It will take the actions of all of us – together with our students and we really need to get our students to work with us – to keep our entire community safe throughout the academic year. We can do it if we do it together.

There are so many people to welcome and it is especially important that we do so this year because more than ever we need to be a community of colleagues who share the many responsibilities and challenges and new ways of doing things that this year has called for and will continue to require. More than ever we need to be a community of co-responsible colleagues, competent, supportive of one another, well-informed, flexible, and caring of our students and one another. It is always good to come back at the start of a new year, to see and engage with one another, to share our excitement. Yet we have never started a year so different from other years, so uncertain in so many ways, so calling for adjusting, so dependent on the contribution of everyone. It is clear that we are up to all that this year asks of us; we have already shown it in the past six months. Today as we gather we can be sure that our Seattle University community of co-responsible leaders welcomes and is capable of meeting all that this year will ask of us.

Who are we as we start this academic year together? Where are we? What is our context? The Ignatian Paradigm that informs our way of educating and the decision-making of our commitments always starts with context – and then proceeds to experience, reflection, action, evaluation. Always context comes first. What is our context as we start this year?

- Perhaps most importantly we are in a new era for inescapably needed breakthroughs into racial equity, revealed especially by the disgrace of the killings and wounding of our Black brothers and sisters. This is the moral challenge which at this time defines our context and our education. For a country where candidates can claim, quote “The United States of America is not systemically racist” we need to be not only non-racist but anti-racist. Because of this primary moral challenge for us, I am asking Natasha Martin in a moment to address us. We also need to take action against our biases in regard to sexism, LGBTQ+ issues, the differently-abled, all that violates respect, dignity and opportunity.
- Our pervasive, comprehensive, ever-present context is also the COVID-19 pandemic which touches all of us all of the time, disrupts our way of living and relating, changes our family life, transforms the education of our children and all aspects of our education at Seattle U and all of our jobs, and changes the hopes of our students. None of us can get away from it even for a moment: it drains and exhausts us, threatens us, prevents us from living freely and renewingly. What it does to us is so much less than what it does to the poor, to immigrants and the homeless, to persons of color, for those doing the jobs needed for all of us, or losing those jobs. This pandemic infects all of us and our students as a pervasive aspect of our context.
- Then there is the presidential election, exactly two months from today. Do we wish it would be sooner or later?! This will not be a pretty time. Visions and fears of America will be fought out, misrepresented,

debated, demeaned, demagogued, caricatured, assaulted loudly and exhaustingly. Forget trying to ignore this dimension of our context for this year, for where we are, who we are, what we know, and what we stand for, hope for, and what our education must include. I have three recommendations: vote, vote, vote!

— Our very campus is in a new context. Last year when we gathered at this event “Capitol Hill” meant something different from what it means today. We are halfway between the East Precinct and Juvenile Detention; we are on the route of protests, caught in the middle. It is driving some of our prospective students away because of the fear of violence. Our students already have been and will be involved and give their voices in those demonstrations and movements. We too are caught in the middle of needing the police for the safety of our campus community of persons and our need to protest against police violence and excessive force especially against some of our citizens. This will not be a quiet year.

— A final context— though you could add more especially the environmental crisis which may make COVID-19 pale by comparison – a final aspect of our context of where we are as a university community of colleagues as we begin this year, is that one month from today you will be able to participate in forums with and to give your views about the finalists for the next president of our university, more correctly, of your university. It has been 24 years since the university community has participated in this process. The Board of Trustees intends to announce the next president by mid-October. So it is coming soon. This decision

represents the future of Seattle U, where you want it to go, what leadership you want it to have. It is very good that, with all the transitions our university is experiencing, that this transition of the university president is occurring. For the community of university colleagues this is an important aspect of the context of this year.

By the way, people are asking me what my attitude is about my last year and with a new president soon being named. They are wondering if they will be seeing a new “Fr. Steve”. Look out, I just might surprise you. Here’s how I am feeling.

[cartoon]

Within the context of action for racial equity, disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the battle of the presidential election, the protests about police use of force, the environmental crisis, and the choice of a new president for the university’s future, we have a way of education that is made for this context. Jesuit education was made for this moment. How blessed we are that this is true and that this is what we know and claim ourselves to be and is our vision.

We come into this year with something new that we did not have last year to guide us at all times but especially and providentially in these times: our Strategic Directions “A Jesuit University of Distinction For a Time of Change.” How great a title that is for what we are experiencing! How fortunate it is that these Strategic Directions were developed, finalized, and promulgated last year just months before the pandemic. The statement in it of our “Our Vision of the Future” says first of all and most clearly: “We will be one of the most innovative and progressive Jesuit and Catholic universities in

the world, educating with excellence at the undergraduate, graduate and professional levels.” It spells this out in “critical thinking, spiritual discernment, ethical reasoning, artistic appreciation, effective communication and digital competence” in “inclusive excellence”, “environmental sustainability”, “a vibrant community... (and) campus life ... for all of our students”, an education catalyzed by key partnerships with the Seattle “region”, and founded on “financial health” and being a “home to alumni.” Jesuit education was indeed made for this moment. It is our guide in turbulent and uncertain times when we need to both know who we are in how we educate and to be flexible within whatever we face.

A good example of how a Jesuit education was made for this moment is Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, who was Jesuit educated both in high school and college. As perhaps the leading person in our country on the pandemic and the soundest mind in the midst of so many uncertainties and falsehoods, Dr Fauci says his Jesuit education gave him three things: “precision of thought”, “brevity of expression”, and “commitment to social justice”. Listen to him and you are hearing how a Jesuit education is made for this moment. I believe it is his education that gives him the courage, regardless of who questions him, to simply give the facts, to explain his reasoning, and remarkably to refrain from personal blame or attack. I would add to his three gifts from his Jesuit education, the proverbial Jesuit insistence on showing always “a discrete charity” in regard to persons.

Jesuit education is made for this moment and can guide and unify us this year because it is engaged with the world rather than standing apart; sees the

world affirmatively rather than seeing only the negative; is committed to “a well-educated solidarity” rather than an easy alliance that is felt but not informed; empowers students to form their own values and commitments and to do their own thinking rather than imposing on them an ideology; insists on competence but also compassion; stresses service of the common good rather than individual satisfactions; invites its students to find beauty in one another and in our common home rather than be narrow in their appreciation of life; and believes that all is in the hands of a merciful God working in the world and in the lives of people rather than a God looking upon them from above with judgement. Could there be a better education for our students for any time but especially for these times and for their futures than the Jesuit education which is ours, is our vision, and is the compass point of our university’s Strategic Directions: “A Jesuit University of Distinction For a Time of Change” ?

If the starting point for the Ignatian Paradigm is “context”, the second and the other one I want to speak about as informing this new academic year, is “experience.” The experience I want to address which bodes so well for the coming year is the experience of the can-do attitude found in all parts of the university and in all of you in the past six months. Here are some examples:

- It is such an important experience of so many of us listening and engaging in these months with students about their hurt from racial injustice, paying special attention to the Black Student Union, holding our vigil for racial justice, communicating about Juneteenth and joining in the Black Lives Matter Day of Action, engaging with our Board of**

Trustees about their commitment to racial equity. The experiences show what we can and must do.

- Enrollment Services hosted 73 admitted undergraduate student receptions, then together with Student Development 120 distinct events for orientation and registration, joined with the schools and colleges in 77 grad admissions sessions, and have had more than 11,000 online Canvas grad views. That’s a can-do experience.**
- The Center for Community Engagement together with eleven faculty instructors and eleven faculty video lecturers engaged 220 incoming students in a free summer course “Engaging Seattle: Pursuing a Just and Humane World.” That is a creative, let’s-do-it-differently experience.**
- After student evaluations of online course in the spring rivaled or surpassed the evaluations by students of their courses last fall, the faculty went much further this summer to develop the highest quality of virtual education when 375 of them took courses and workshops through our critically important Center for Digital Learning and Innovation under the leadership of Rick Fehrenbacher – to enhance even further their course design, pedagogy and content for student learning. That experience shows the dedication of our faculty to meet and surpass the challenges of our times and to invest in student success.**
- Another example of the experience of taking on important matters and addressing them collaboratively is the work of the two important**

groups, composed especially of faculty, addressing Academic Program Portfolio Review and the Academic Calendar Review as central to the implementation of the Strategic Directions. This work has gone on during these disrupted times and both will bring forward proposals important for the university's future in this academic year.

- Both the Academic Assembly and the Staff Council (which is celebrating its first anniversary of participating in shared governance) came together over the summer in special meetings to address the necessary contributions of both groups to prepare for the year and to be up to what it will require. Special thanks to the leadership of Frank Shih and Leann Wagele of these elected, essential groups and the positive experience among them for the coming year.**
- When our students and their families were caught in the consequences of the pandemic on their finances and questioned their ability to continue their education with us, University Advancement stepped up, said we can help, and in a few weeks raised \$1,400,000 for emergency student needs and special financial help. Then over a period of three weeks, they got nine donors to match a one million dollar gift for the benefit of scholarships in Education, Albers, Nursing, Law and for students from Ethiopia and Rwanda. They did all of this while pushing the campaign up to \$268 million on a goal of \$275 million, empowering our future. That's really a can-do experience!**
- Something else rising up on campus represents \$100 million from that campaign, a breakout in our educational offerings, created by the professional expertise of hundreds of workers. That's the new Center**

for Science and Innovation, the greatest project ever of Seattle U. It's really coming along and coming together. Do you want to see?

[time lapse video]

Of course it has needed a superintendent of construction of unusual expertise.

[photo of Fr Steve as construction worker]

- I am very impressed with what the experience of Student Development, the Center for Community Engagement, and Residence Life has been this summer by being engaged with our students in their active participation in rallies, protests and marches for racial justice, the initiatives of the Black Student Union, online reading courses for neighborhood preschoolers, mentoring of middle school kids, fostering online clubs and organizations, and at the same time making all the preparations needed for 1200 students residing on campus this fall and their safety.**

- For the past four months the Re-Opening Task Force has been the coordinating and decision-making group, chaired by Shane Martin and Tim Leary, for bringing together all that needs to happen for this year. What an experience of rolling up their sleeves and making it happen I have observed in this task force. It touched on health, led by Tara Hicks and with the oversight of infectious disease doctor Michael Mynt (In addition to Tara, let me call out the exceptional ongoing work of Josh Halbert of Campus Public Safety for devising and operating excellent contact tracing and daily health screening processes.) The Task Force**

addressed facilities, classrooms, buildings, signage, equipment led by Rob Schwartz; instructional continuity with Bob Dullea and faculty and deans; legal and compliance issues under Mary Petersen; the student experience led by Alvin Sturdivant; enrollment issues with Melore Nielsen; employee and workforce needs addressed by Michelle Clements; finances for all of this assessed and advised by Wilson Garone; and with faculty and staff represented by Frank Shih and Leann Wagele. Their experience of what can be done when colleagues really work together typifies the efforts of the whole university.

When we look at the challenges of our context – which some might say is the perfect storm for our university – we can be confident about how we will do and how we will be “a Jesuit university of distinction for a time of change” because we can see across the whole university an exceptional experience in the last six months of colleagues proving the needed co-responsibility to face constructively, professionally, creatively what is the greatest challenge the university has had in fifty years. We can be confident we will do well because we have done well when we needed to.

Let me mention that while most of the university is on the edge of beginning the academic year, one school, the School of Law, has already begun. Hats off to the School of Law that brought in a first year class that exceeded its goal while keeping within their financial aid target, and importantly, maintaining their LSAT level. They are really setting the pace and laying down the challenge to all of us. They have done this because all of the school really worked at it under Dean Annette Clark and its Director of Admissions Gerald Heppler.

Even as we have done so well these past six months and are ready to face the year, it is important that you know from me that we face unprecedented financial challenges this year. They stem from the very significant losses of residence income, from an unavoidable decline in enrollment equal to what other universities of our kind are experiencing, from the sizeable costs to protect our university community, and from lost revenue from many usual sources. You have already experienced the impact of this on your livelihood from the necessity of not providing any compensation increase, with some having been on furlough, with cutbacks in operating costs, travel and with a hiring freeze. All of these measures together will not meet the financial challenge the university faces even as we seek to tap into some unusual, rainy-day resources to help us through this year. We will need to take additional financial measures which will affect all of us to some degree, and some of us more so. We will seek to take these measures with a special consideration of equity, with as much consultation and consideration as possible, and do so in a way which supports the emergence of Seattle U from these times with a strong educational and operational foundation for our health and growth in the future. I ask for your understanding, your acceptance of some sacrifice, and your support as we manage in difficult times.

As I conclude my remarks at this welcome of faculty and staff to the new year, I return to that vision of our newly-approved Strategic Directions. As it says in the Book of Proverbs, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” So we must focus on our vision that “we will be one of the most innovative and progressive Jesuit and Catholic universities in the world, educating with excellence at the undergraduate, graduate and professional levels.” I firmly

believe that Seattle University's best years lie ahead because I know of no Jesuit university that has as great an upside potential as we do, as strong a sense of being genuinely Jesuit, and as promising an impetus of what I call "The Seattle Synergy" can be for us. Let's keep our vision; let's keep our community; let's keep co-responsible collegueship. Welcome to the new year.