

President's Welcome to the New Year

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Good morning, a very good morning, and welcome to the 123rd year of Seattle College and University's history of education. Yes, in two years we will be celebrating our 125th anniversary of Jesuit higher education in Seattle. I hope that this year and next year will prepare us for that celebration and be a year of the development of our collegueship as faculty and staff and administration so that we come into that anniversary as one university proud of its history, clear and confident about its present, and excited about its future. Again, welcome, my colleagues new and old to our 123rd year.

Happy New Year! Indeed, for isn't it true that the year does not begin for us in January when we turn our calendars, but rather at the start of September when we turn from summer into fall? I believe it is now in our DNA, after starting so many school years, dozens of them, for ourselves from kindergarten through graduate school, for your own kids, and for us as university colleagues starting anew with our students each September. It is typical on New Year's Day to look back at the previous year and the one ahead and to make resolutions for improvement—few of which are realized. So too it is fairly typical and predictable for me as president of the university on this occasion to cite the accomplishments of the last year and to tell you what we will do in the coming year. I am going to resist doing that; in fact, I am not going to do that. What that would be about is what we have done and what will we do. So it would be all about doing. I want today rather to ask the questions, "How are we?" "Who are we?" "How is our collegueship and community, our coherence, our university culture?" These are more personal questions of being and relationship rather than of doing.

This summer a leading faculty member came to see me about a key dimension of our education. He spoke about a fear we were drifting. He said he and others were tired of doing things okay; that they wanted to do something really well. He felt this was part of what underlay what he thought was a hard year for the university last year. Then he said something, and I quote him word for word, which has stuck with me all of these months. He said, "I think we need to get really clear on who we are." I agree and that is more a "being" question than a "doing" question.

I found myself over the summer in speaking to the Cabinet in June and to 60 university leaders in July, almost pleading: "Shall we never stop and care for one another!?" That is really a being question, a deeply relational one, and that strikes not only at how and who we are, but how and who we are for one another. It's the question of the quality of our collegueship, the issue of the cohesion of our community, and the test of our living the mission.

I believe I am brought to ask and address the question of "How are we?" for three main reasons.

First, we live in a time when the very value of a university education is scrutinized, debated, and challenged by a more skeptical public. We can no longer say "trust us"; we need to prove the value of the very thing we are committed to and have given our lives to. At the same time not

only the value of what we are about is questioned, but the goals or purposes of a university education are more than ever up for grabs: professional and job preparation, intellectual and thinking development, personal and moral formation; whether university years should be a free space or a densely populated and pragmatic space. This first context challenges me to ask the deeper questions of who we are, what we most deeply believe, how are we commonly committed as a community of colleagues?

The second thing that propels me to ask myself and you the deeper questions of who and how we are is that we live in a culture in which polarization is easy and dialogue is difficult. Polarization is not just somewhere in America; it is everywhere: not only on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., but also on Capitol Hill in Seattle. We can debate what causes and drives this—whether economic inequality, or technological diffusion of views, or the lack of any remaining sense of a common good and a common set of values which holds people together—but we cannot debate that we are not immune to this polarization and greater difficulty of dialogue. Last year was a hard year, and one that frayed our university both among ourselves and with our students, whether concerning unionization, or fossil fuel divestment, or a tobacco-free campus, or raising questions about a senior streak, or matters that touch on academic freedom and being a Catholic university and what does and does not promote human dignity. The question of “Who are we?” and “How are we?” does not seek to limit or remove these healthy issues for a university, but asks how are we with one another in addressing them and especially in disagreeing about them.

The third reality which moves me to ask of us at the start of this year these deeper, more personal questions is that even with the historically high ranking of our university as now 5th among 136 universities of our kind in the 15 western states and our superb graduate and Law rankings, we still are facing more severe challenges than we have in 20 years of attracting, retaining, and graduating undergraduates, transfer, graduate, and Law students in sufficient numbers such that our university, which depends on student funds for 95% of its budget, is financially confident now and about the future. This issue is urgent. When you feel urgency—and we all should—the question of who we are, of how we are, how we relate with one another, and how we join in our common mission becomes ever more important.

Since this is a more personal talk than usual, let me speak more personally about “Who we are” and “How we are”. I know I have learned some very important things from leading the university in its accomplishments the last seventeen years. I believe what I have learned has relevance for all of us.

What I have learned is that when you get to the end of the day, what is important really is not what you have accomplished but whether you have done what you have done with joy and with gratitude. We can all march through the challenges of the day or the Quarter or the year or the decade. Then you ask yourself how much have I enjoyed it, how much have I been aware of the reasons for thankfulness that have been all around in all the doing, all that joy and all that gratitude everywhere for the taking and the living and the aspiring?

Really what we do is all about people: our colleagues, our students, our alumni, our university friends. It’s there in the people, in the relationships with those people, in the being and working together, in the getting tired or laughing or struggling with one another. It’s there that there is

the joy; the joy and the gratitude and even the love. We—or at least I—can get so caught up in the doing that we don't allow the learning and growing of our students and their unique and precious lives and aspirations to be experienced and felt and rejoiced in. Just as much, we can miss the goodness and the true character, the interests and personal individuality of our colleagues with whom we carry out our mission, and find joy and gratitude in and with them. I am convinced that beyond all we do, who and how we are with our students and one another in joy and gratitude—and yes at times in love—is very important to who and how we each are personally and is more impactful for the actuality of our mission than anything we do.

I remember back in my first year as president how Katie Dubik, who was then student body president, speaking to a convocation of faculty and staff, told of who had been memorable for her in her Seattle U. experience. She challenged all of us in a direct and simple way: “Make yourself memorable to a Seattle University student!” Making memorable is a personal thing, dependent on the kind of person we are and how we relate to students, find joy in and gratitude for them, and show by who and how we are that they count for us. I also remember Katie saying to us, “And we'd like to see more smiles around here!” As an alumnus said to me just yesterday: “Every student can say, ‘I loved my university.’ I can honestly say, ‘My university loved me.’”

I've been thinking very much over the summer about what is the true culture of Seattle U. I know two things: 1) The actual culture of Seattle U. shapes and conditions all of us, far more than the wording of our mission or the adequacy of our plans; and 2) the real culture of our university comes through, even subliminally, to our students and to one another, and has more influence than anything else on what our actual impact is. I loved the quote I heard this week: “Culture eats strategy for breakfast every day of the week!” I have deeply loved the culture of Seattle U. It is what has made me want to work here and to find some legacy of my life here. For us as faculty, staff and administrators our university culture in its actuality is our “core curriculum”—i.e., what is core for our carrying out our work and mission.

I experience our culture as positively believing in and loving the kind of university we are; a culture of valuing who our students are who choose us and come to us and who love being with us; a culture of loving where we are in the heart of this dynamic, progressive city; a culture of a rather unique unity of faculty and staff as contributing to mission and knowing and appreciating one another; a culture which is proud of being Jesuit and knowing what that means in our own terms; a culture in which we and our students can be who we are and do not need to put on airs; a culture that is more about how our students grow in their education and development than in how advanced they are when they come to us; a culture of service, commitment to sustainability, and of challenging itself to justice.

I do believe at the same time that our culture is strained; is a culture which is not as transparent as it wants to be; not as inclusive in its decisions and governance of as many voices as it should have; is a culture which can be cynical and overly judgmental; is a culture in which often each part feels it is overworked and frustrated more than other parts are; is a culture which always feels the pinch of the lack of financial resources; is a culture which doesn't securely believe in its educational excellence and therefore is overly modest about itself; is a culture which is felt to be changing and is uncertain and suspicious of where that change is leading.

These are some of the factors of our culture in its actuality, though I am sure that I do not have the ability to discern fully what is and what is most influencing within it. Perhaps as president—even though I do know so much about the university—some or maybe even much of our true culture is kept from me or I am not in contact with it. But you can be sure that our culture, even if we can't mentally capture it, is always operative and shaping us.

It is because of my conviction of the importance of our actual culture that I drive to these fundamental questions of “Who are we?” and “How are we?” They are the realities which more than others determine our culture, our community, our collegiality, and I believe the fulfillment of our mission. Of course, our structures and infrastructures, our programs and policies, our facilities and investments, our ways of being organized and our plans, are essential to the outcomes we articulate and the fulfillment of the mission we believe in. However, ultimately it comes down to the people, the kind of people we are and the way we relate with one another. We are in the people business, the critical work of educating and forming our students as people. How people are, how we are, who people are, who we are, more directly than anything else influences the educations and lives of our students as people. In the end it is all about people. That may seem obvious, but it gets lost.

So as we start this year and get about what we do, can we see some ways we can respond to these questions of being?

Above all we simply must find a greater culture of dialogue among us which respects one another, respects the need to have structures of decision making and gives much more room and at earlier moments in processes leading to decisions, for more voices to be heard and learned from. Someone told me over the summer: “For an institution of learning, we are not very good at learning from one another.” A start is real dialogue with openness to having one's own mind changed as much as changing others. How rare is good dialogue in a pervasively polarized culture! Do we need to relearn how to dialogue? I am committed to doing everything I can to foster true and greater dialogue among us.

I watch Pope Francis who has changed the conversation in the Catholic Church and influenced the whole world by being above all a person, a master of dialogue. He sees life as being on a journey, walking on a pilgrimage, and getting to know and dialogue with all of your fellow travelers along the way. His deep belief is that knowledge of one another and friendship must precede dialogue for it opens those who dialogue to truly hear and be heard by one another. Respect is not enough; friendship and humble fellowship are essential to dialogue if it is to be more than argument or stating one's views to one another. We all must ask what a more dialogue-friendly Seattle University looks like.

Finally for me the kind of actual culture among us and with our students which will make our mission more real and more realized depends on the simple reality of care. The most common Jesuit motto in universities, heralded often on their banners, is “cura personalis”, which from the Latin means personal care, or care of persons. Care of persons: it's why our first stated value is “We put the good of students first” and why our second value is “We value excellence in learning with great teachers who are active scholars.” Perhaps what is lacking from our actual culture is not personal care of students, which we do have, but more of an emphasis on care of

persons as care of us as faculty, staff, and administrators, for one another. There is no question that this care of persons is shown, comes through, when it is needed in loss of loved ones or illness. Maybe we could use more of it when it is not needed, in our day to day relating to one another. It feels sensitive on my part to ask, what would a culture of greater care among us at Seattle U. look like? That should be asked because it has everything to do not only with what we do, but also with who and how we are, and how much joy, even rejoicing, we find in one another and how much gratitude we experience for one another.

I believe I have been faithful—however untypical you may have found my remarks today at this start of our 123rd year—in not speaking of the accomplishments of the past or the promises of the coming year. I feel good and right in starting this year together by inviting us to look at and grow in who we are and how we are. May our year together be blessed by God and by one another.