

President's Report to the University

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Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

Let me start by saying that for the second year of this report I have changed the name from “The President’s State of the University Report” to “The President’s Report to the University”. For me—and perhaps this is only for me—“The State of the University” sounds a bit like an autopsy on the body of the university. Or it could lead to a depiction of the university which is a kind of “paint-by-numbers” portrait. I do know my numbers and I am committed that you can and will also know them, but not through this report. A “State of the University” lends itself far too much for my taste and preference to “paralysis by PowerPoint”; you know, “follow the bouncing ball” as I read to you off the screen my notes for this talk.

So this talk will be none of those but rather my attempt to tell you straight out my reflections on our university, what excites me, what challenges and even threats I see, perhaps what wakes me up at night, or gets me up early in the morning with eagerness, and how our future looks from my vantage point. I am kidded that any day of the week I can wake up and write a talk on “Seven Goals for Seven Years” or “A Dozen Challenges for the Decade”. Sometimes the “seven” and the “dozen” or the whatever number even coincides with the other, but don’t bet on it. I shall resist this. Also, as you may guess, I have no problem in taking the lead, of putting out my plans and then asking others, “What do you think?” which really means “What do you think of my plans!” I will resist this too and will allow the Strategic Planning Council, now in operation, full freedom and responsibility with your help to chart our course. I look forward to the results of its deliberations. My report to you this afternoon is about my thinking about where we are as a university and where we are going, rather than laying out the data in numbers or the goals as planks in our plan.

This talk, however, is not about me, even if it is personal. I cannot give enough thanks to all of you for how you care for our students and care for one another, do the hard work of creating an excellent academic program, give personal attention to students in hundreds of services provided for them, recruit new students, care for our campus, engage our alumni, raise money, reach out in service and in justice to our neighborhood and community, in short love and live our mission and make it credible. My report to the university is a response to a university community for which I am so grateful and of which I am so proud.

I am in a more reflective mood this year than ever before because of some changes in me. I have celebrated and survived my fiftieth anniversary as a Jesuit with full consciousness that we younger Jesuits used to think these golden jubilarians were very much over the hill. I feel I’m still climbing the hill with a steady pace. I have also been appointed by the trustees to a fourth five-year term after having completed fifteen years of service. This causes me to look forward to the next five years and what’s to be done. We are preparing during this current year this decade’s comprehensive capital campaign, significantly surpassing the last record-breaking one.

This too makes me reflect not only on “Can we do it?”—which does wake me up once in a while at night—but “What do we most need to do?” for a carbo-starved vigorous university?

I am also more aware of a personal last long haul; hopefully well beyond this five-year term, by the fact that increasingly people are asking me to “mentor” them. I’ve begun to think that “mentor” is code for “mature” as in you are really ripe, maybe over-ripe and needing to be plucked. So also it is with many now referring to my “legacy”, which is code for “When is it you said you’d be leaving?!”

All of this makes me more reflective, more thoughtful about the future, having a recollected gathering of thoughts in a moment of pausing to build up energy for the road ahead.

What frames my thinking and my report to you are the conclusions we drew recently from an environmental scan carried out over the summer in order to see more clearly what external factors will most impact the university over the coming years. There are four them: 1) the economy, 2) the demographics of who will be seeking university education, 3) the prospect of jobs and careers for graduates and 4) the impact of technology on our education. Together these can feel like the “perfect storm” hitting us all at once.

1) We know that the economy is causing families to rethink how they allocate resources for the education of their sons and daughters, that businesses are rethinking how much they can allocate to subsidize employees for graduate education, that philanthropists are similarly more cautious with their money, and that new competitors are entering the marketplace offering a less expensive education. 2) We know from the demographics that fewer traditional college-seekers with the means to afford it will graduate from high schools and that many more college students will come from new, diverse groups who have not traditionally gone to college, bringing with them much greater need, and that fewer typical graduate students will have the current work positions or means for graduate studies. 3) We know that our changing labor market is redefining the areas in which universities need to prepare students and that more than ever before, universities are under pressure to prepare and steer every student, regardless of major, toward a job and a career. 4) Then there’s technology, perhaps, the most challenging environmental factor before us. We know that technology is presenting a disruptive impact on how we educate, how our students already and increasingly will learn and what they will expect from our technology. And we all know how technology is enticing today’s students with easier alternatives that demand huge investments by universities. These four winds of economy, demographics, jobs, and technology come at us and at every university from all sides and call from us to be very thoughtful about how we plot our course in these stormy conditions. They give rise to my reflections and my report of these reflections to you.

My conclusions about what we should do are captured by the following five imperatives which come from our discussions about the environmental scan:

- 1) “Whatever you do well, do better.”
- 2) “Capitalize on what cannot be commoditized.”
- 3) “Accentuate what differentiates you.”
- 4) “Do not chase the technology but make it empower your quality.”
- 5) “Know your particular value proposition and stick with it.”

1) What is it that we do well, that we could do better? We are very good at mission, at values, at ethics, at pushing reflection, at meaning-making. We do these well; we need to do them even better. We are good at providing an individualized education and services, with professors who care about the learning of students, with a personalized application and admissions process, and with the individual attention given to students in services, sports, recreation, guidance, counseling, advising. We do this well; it is what we can and need to do better. We have a long experience of educating a diverse student body. Since we already do this well, we will need to do this better as even more diverse students will be coming to us if we can open the financial doors for them to be able to be our students. We are very good at service and service-learning, at justice and action on behalf of justice, at the Youth Initiative, at outreach programs, at neighborhood and city relations. This is our forte, what we do well; we need to do it better.

We are on the way to doing campus well: new buildings; attractive, modern, effective facilities; great gathering spaces; wonderful gardens; pervasive wrap-around art of quality and significance; the best in ecological practice. It has taken so much to get us here so that we can now begin to say “We do campus well” and still have so much to get where we want to be. This is also what we should do better. I think this is a good imperative for all of us to reflect on and heed: “Whatever you do well, do better.” This shows our way forward.

2) How about that second imperative, “Capitalize on what cannot be commoditized?” First of all it is evident that much of what we do well cannot be commoditized. You cannot digitize the Youth Initiative, or mission and meaning-making, or individualized personal attention, or living in an artistic and ecological community.

In my view the most important thing that cannot be commoditized or digitized is what I would call the developmental or formational. This critical dimension lies behind my unflagging insistence that we focus on the student’s total campus and educational experience. Put simply, even grossly, what students and families (and even graduate and law students to more of an extent than we realize) are buying from us is the student college and university experience. What they want from us which cannot be packaged and put online is the social, developmental, community-building, friend-making, great residential learning and living experience, activity-joining, leadership growth, fun, identity exploration, trying on of adulthood, and learning from mistakes, confidence building, value formulation, commitment and vocation choosing, etc.

It is not just that these would make for a nicer or happier university. Rather these components of the total student experience which cannot be commoditized are critical to and increasingly important both for students and for our specific value as a university to them. While there is so

much about how university education will change, and rightly so, these core requirements of our distinctive university will not only not change but will become more determinative of why students will choose us, pay for our kind of independent education, and not only be satisfied but thrive among us. I also believe that although this experience has always been a key dimension of the best universities, it will become more not less sought after and prized by the increasingly technologically sophisticated and plugged-in student who knows what he or she really wants and needs from a university. As students are increasingly connected by technology more widely, they will have a greater need to be grounded in an actual, non-virtual, community of learners and friends on a real campus for the sake of the depth of their learning and development. It's less about "bricks and mortar"; more about how an education is grounded in experience and is rooted deeply in human interchange to be formative and impactful.

3) What differentiates us which we should accentuate? Perhaps you want to say, as on a multi-choice test, "all of the above". Yes, but there are more profound things which differentiate us as part of the Jesuit educational sector from most of higher education and which we should accentuate. In my mind they are three and they are interrelated: Jesuit education is a deep education, it is an education carried out in community, and it is an education which honors the spiritual dimension for our students.

In an era of an increasingly wide and easy access to knowledge, our education goes deep in analysis and cogency, critical thinking, in evaluation and judging, in imagination and art, in argument and writing and in doing something meaningful and relevant for life and for others with all that is known. "Deep" differentiates us.

Education carried out in community, in group engagement, in what is called "lateral learning", or "collegial learning" is ever more our way of education in our kind of university in company with the best educational universities. Because I stepped out of the classroom in 1990, I don't think I could teach today because of what I observe now is the professor's highly skilled way of education by group discussion, group study and projects, group presentation and dialogue, a way of education in community, encountering and engaging the other, the different, the disagreeing, the community essential for deeper knowledge and self-knowledge. This lateral learning with professors who know how to structure and maximize this way of learning increasingly differentiates us and places us among the most effective educators.

Both of these educational ways of going deep and doing so in a community of learners touch upon and open the door to a third differentiator which we should accentuate: the honoring and education of the spiritual dimension of our students. We are a university which does not ignore the student's "lived relationship to Mystery", i.e. his or her spirituality. We would not exist as a Jesuit and religiously-based, Catholic, university if we did not believe in or did not think we could help the student know and live his or her spirituality. In another era of our tradition as a university we would simply have called this the education of the student in faith. In our era, in respect for our students, in a more inclusive time which recognizes the greater diversity of how people know and live their sacred, human reality, we do not lose sight of the spiritual in our education but we treat it with greater sensitivity and freedom. The spiritual differentiates our education. We must not be afraid to accentuate this inherent, defining reality of what we are

about as a Jesuit university, especially when most universities give little place to the spiritual dimension for their students.

4) What does the impertive, “Do not chase the technology, but make the technology empower your quality” ask of us? It is easy for us to be panicked by how technology might disrupt the way in which we deliver a Seattle University education. But we needn’t be. We can clearly look at our technology needs and opportunities and we can respond to them confidently because we see how they can improve our educational quality.

I find it is helpful to break this into three parts. First, it is clear that we need to make very significant capital investments in our technology infrastructure because it is not what it needs to be. Next year we will not be dedicating a new facility as we have done in successive years with the library, then the fitness center, and now with the new Seattle University Park. Rather our capital resources will be dedicated to a more robust and up-to-date technology infrastructure which will be mostly unseen but which will make possible what we will do technologically. Secondly, the new technology will give us the opportunity to improve the quality of the education of our students, adapting where appropriate to how they learn and what they expect. New technology will enhance our quality with the new learning management system and dozens of other means, confidently used by professors and other service providers, who are committed to our distinctive education and its quality. Thirdly, we will more confidently but prudently introduce various online and hybrid courses and educational components to complement, expand, and make more available our education for our current students in order that they stay on track toward graduation, and to make our education more accessible to new students.

In the long run what will count and win the day for universities such as ours is quality. We must accept and engage the opportunities and challenges of technology to advance and deepen the kind of education we believe in and know best. We will need new, professional expertise to show us the way, a faculty and staff dedicated to develop their use of the technological means made available to them, and a steady hand to guide the university and to keep it on course in stormy seas. Essentially we should not chase technology, but welcome and embrace how it can help us do better what we are committed to and what flows from our mission.

5) The final imperative which frames my reflections and report is, “Know your particular value proposition and stick with it.” What this means is give your prospective students a real choice by being clear what are the specific values of our education, prove that value in their educational experience, and have excellent career planning and placement. These are expressed well in a conceptual way in our mission statement and articulated values, but they are embodied and made real in what we actually do which is distinctive and credible. Can we articulate clearly and simply our value proposition first for ourselves and then for others? How would you do it?

Scott McClellan, our new vice president for communications, told me that the other day he was meeting with a rather large group of directors of a division of the university, asking them how they thought we should communicate who we are and what we offer. They turned the question around on him and asked him, from his early observations, what would he say we are about. He found himself replying almost without thinking: “excellence with purpose”. I think he surprised himself! They immediately asked Scott if they could start using that! It’s not bad is it?

“Excellence with purpose”; it could hardly be said more simply. That’s a value proposition which brings together our academic and total educational quality with the meaning, service, and spirituality of what we aim for.

The question we all need to be clear about is what distinguishes our education, why is it especially valuable to students in our day (or rather their day) and how do we capture this value proposition in our self-expression as Seattle University? Frankly, I find myself excited and grateful for what our value proposition is and confident that it is a winning proposition for the next years and beyond.

These are my reflections on what the environmental scan emphasizes or even insists we must do. Again they are:

- 1) “Whatever you do well, do better.
- 2) “Capitalize on what cannot be commoditized.”
- 3) “Accentuate what differentiates you.”
- 4) “Do not chase the technology, but make it empower your quality.”
- 5) “Know your particular value proposition and stick with it.”

Please accept these reflections of mine in the context that I eagerly await the results of the Strategic Planning Council and how their recommended plans will set out the most important challenges and opportunities in front of us as a university. I have not wanted to pre-empt their deliberations with my views about the future, though I hope my thoughts—together with yours—will help inform them in their important work on behalf of all of us.

In closing, perhaps you can gauge much of the potential of a university by how it is situated in regard to the four factors of the economy, the demographics, jobs, and technology. I’d like you to also consider where we are situated, literally. Would you want to be anywhere else in the country than in Seattle and right where we are in Seattle in relation to these factors? The combination of the economy of our region, the attractiveness of the culture and people of our city, the need for well educated people for important careers here, and the abundant technology resources of our region... this combination of factors is simply unsurpassed in our country. There is no better place to be a university—a flexible, mission-energized, independent and Jesuit university—than in Seattle.

If you would move our campus not just miles but even blocks from where we are would you choose to move it? On the edge of the downtown but not buried by it, surrounded by medical centers and vibrant new commercial and residential districts, reaching out in welcome, service, and listening to a fascinating community of which we choose to be a good neighbor, and enjoying a fabulous campus perfect for our engaged purposes—we are perfectly located and our potential is great. This is simply the best place for an education which is “excellence with purpose”.

Thank you for coming this afternoon to hear and reflect on my report to you, a report without numbers or PowerPoint, a report in which I hope I have not mentored or expounded on my legacy. Rather I hope this report from your president shows you something of my thinking about our future and encourage your own thinking. I also hope you receive it as an act of gratitude to a great and committed university community of colleagues. Before we wash all of this down with some libations atop the library, I would enjoy hearing some of your questions, your observations, and your own thinking.