

An Insider's Conversation with the President of Seattle University

- September 5, 2013
- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

The students of Seattle University have sometimes kidded me by saying, “Fr. Steve, we know by heart all five of your talks!” I assure them that I have six talks, not just five, so they had better listen up. I also am known to say that I give 200 talks a year, and that I say something in five of them. The Jesuits of my community have been known to refer to the other 195 talks as my “Princess Margaret Talks”: limp wrist wave, “nice to be here”; “welcome to Seattle University”; “we are honored”; “Goodbye”.

Within this range of talks there is none I look forward to more than this one, now in its third year. I look forward to it because it is a more informal talk, between friends, a Seattle U. insider's talk, a time when I can, as it were, think out loud and let you in on what I think, feel, fear, hope, and plan for the university which you and I are both committed to and serve. So I invite you to come inside and have a conversation with the president of your Seattle University.

How are we?

Let's imagine you come to my office—and you are always welcome to do so—the same office where Fr. Lemieux and Fr. Sullivan worked. You come there for a personal conversation with me, before joining me to sample some wine. Come and sit in one of the two leather chairs with worn armrests from 16 years of use in conversations. Look around and see the framed photos on the wood-paneled walls of Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, and Corazon Aquino receiving honorary doctorates from me. See the Arabian carpet and inlaid mother-of-pearl table given by our alum, trustee, and builder of the world's tallest building, Mohamed Alabbar of Dubai. Scan 16 years' worth of mementos from commencements, weddings, board service, children of colleagues, ROTC plaques, awards, even a bobble-head Rudy the Redhawk. Enjoy my neat office, but don't get up and look around the corner into the alcove where I do my real work and lay out all the things which I have not yet dealt with. How might our conversation go: you and I casually, frankly, informally?

First of all, I'd thank you for your service on a board of Seattle U., your volunteering your time and experience and expertise to guide our university in its mission and in its specific schools, colleges, and programs. I'd thank you for your dedication and I'd want to know how you are. How is your family, how was your summer, how is your work going, are you by chance a new grandparent, is there a son or daughter who is in college or needs to get into college? I can help. Our conversation would start here because for me as a Jesuit priest and president, how you are is really the first and most important thing.

You'd probably ask, “Father, how are you?” I'd be waiting for that question and would have plenty to say. I turned 70 last month so I am out to prove my belief that each decade is better than the previous one. I celebrated my birthday while serving for nine days as a chaplain at a Carmelite Monastery of nuns in rural England. They threw a most unusual party which consisted

of me sitting in an armchair on one side of a divided room with 18 of them in full habit on the other side entering from a door leading to the monastery which they never leave. On the low shelf dividing the room in two I cut a cake, we all had a glass of an alcoholic punch, which they particularly enjoyed, they sang happy birthday, and got a bit giddy with questions and comments. None of them could believe I was turning 70 rather than 60... and neither should you. Beat that for an unusual birthday party!

Turning 70, having those quiet and deep nine days at the monastery, and then eight days of a silent retreat in Northern Wales made me reflect on how I and Seattle U. are. I realize that as I begin my 17th year I am starting my last long haul of service as president—heightened by moving now into a multiyear major campaign—and I want to give it my all and give it my best. The question of my legacy came up, but I felt that is really more up to God working in me, than in what I do. Never before have I felt such a pervasive sense of gratitude for the people of Seattle U.: our dear students and alumni, my esteemed faculty and staff colleagues, the treasured members of the administrative cabinet, you our board members, friends, donors and civic and community partners. Gratitude, gratitude, gratitude for the people of Seattle University, our lives and community, which is the best reality of what we are about and which makes everything else worth it. This gratitude felt like a beautiful cloth covering, protecting this whole community of people.

My other feeling—since you did ask how I am and I have lots to tell because I was given a six-week break to restock for the next long haul—the other dominant feeling is a new amazement and perception of what an incredible instrument for good Seattle University is. Our being an inclusively and proudly Catholic university, an authentically and deeply Jesuit one, with a catalyzing mission which inspires all of us, with a location in the heart of a great and dynamic city, on a campus which is now a gem, with faculty who increasingly are the very best in their fields and committed to the learning of students, with staff dedicated to the growth of these students, our highly diverse students who choose us because of the outgoing and value-laden and forward-looking, challenging and personally-caring university we are, with 1,000 connections through our schools into the community, highlighted by the Seattle University Youth Initiative, and our global thrust from our Seattle location and motivated by our Jesuit mission... all of this and more overwhelms me, astounding me afresh about what an incredible instrument for good we are as a university. No wonder this is where you and I want to serve. Could there be anything we could involve ourselves in that could do more good for our students and for our world? Because of my weeks at the monastery and in the spiritual retreat, I thought and felt of this as an instrument for good in the hands of God to be deftly employed and used by Him for His purposes. You don't have to share this last perception, but as a Jesuit it is central to me, and you did ask quite a while ago now how I am.

What are the big issues at Seattle U.?

Perhaps our conversation in these well-worn leather chairs turns toward what is most on my mind, perhaps keeping me awake at night, or most engaged in during the day, or professionally focused on by our administration or cabinet. What is most at play at Seattle U.; what are the big issues? Not just how we'll be this year, but how we'll be five or 10 or more years from now; how do we extend our impact locally and globally.

I made the mistake—though I thought I was clever—two years ago at the first of these reports on the university to our advisory boards to give a talk which I entitled “Seven Goals for Seven Years”. Others called it the “Seven Brides for Seven Brothers” talk and wanted to censor any future, insider ramblings of mine. Well, I’m sorry, but when you ask me about what’s on our minds at Seattle U., what’s in play, there are—guess what—seven and only seven and no less than seven things to which I keep coming back. Here are the seven big issues:

- #1 How do we navigate, as a university, the threats and opportunities of the new technologies transforming universities everywhere? (That’s the one that wakes me up at night!)
- #2 How do we make our education more affordable for students and their families in the current economic situation, and how does their great education lead to a great job and career?
- #3 How do we advance Seattle U.’s academic quality so that it will become the first thing people think of about the university? How do we better ensure that we become the first choice university for our choice of students?
- #4 How do we build on our strengths in science, technology, engineering, and math education—what they call S.T.E.M.—and expand our programming in health sciences to help meet the health care needs of the Pacific Northwest region?
- #5 Being the independent university at the urban heart of Seattle, how do we take full advantage of the dynamism and optimism of Seattle?
- #6 How do we build on our extraordinary developments for global education in the new core curriculum and in establishing “convergence sites” so that all students receive an exceptional global education for their futures in a globalized world?
- #7 How can we guarantee that our Catholic and Jesuit soul as a university more pervasively shapes the mission, academic programs, and initiatives of the university?

In my mind—but not only in my mind but also in the minds of our trustees and our administration—these seven questions or issues are what is at play at Seattle U. One group—because of their responsibility—may emphasize one or another of these seven issues—e.g., the trustees on affordability, finances, careers; or the provost and faculty on academic quality, research and scholarship, and the use of technology to promote student learning, and opportunities the university may have to expand programs in S.T.E.M. and health sciences, or me on the Catholic Jesuit soul, but somehow these seven challenges encircle all of us and unite all of us in our efforts.

If you, from the comfort of your chair in my office, ask me—hoping the answer is “yes”—“Is that all?!”, you’ll probably, to your regret, hear me say “No, there is an eighth issue emerging and getting more attention, but which is not yet quite ripe.” It is “What is the great student experience at Seattle U.?” What makes it up? How does the experience hold together? What

makes it memorable? How does it form community? How do we strengthen it? How does it galvanize alumni in the commitment to make that experience possible for new students today? How would you name or define the great Seattle University student experience—college experience, graduate experience, Law experience—and how would you communicate it and market it? This is important because I am convinced that for our kind of university this experience is what—as much or even more than anything else—students are looking for and buying in coming to Seattle U. I’m convinced that the student experience is our niche in the university market. So this eighth issue is quickly forcing itself into the circle of the other seven. Maybe the title should be: “Eight points on the star of Seattle U.”

Addressing these big issues is about the impact we have—the impact we have on our students and the impact they have on the world; the impact we have as a Jesuit institution located in the heart or hub of a forward-thinking culture and innovation. Our graduates are engaged citizens who serve and lead to make a difference. They are distinguished by their commitment to serve something greater than self and have a meaningful, sustained and lasting impact on the communities they serve, whether locally or globally.

What’s ahead in the coming year?

About now you may be beginning to think of that sampling of wines I’ve promised you after our little chat in my office, so you throw out one last easy question. “What, Fr. Steve, is coming up this year?” I thought you’d never ask!

We have a very big and exciting year ahead of us at Seattle U. The Law School is already rolling under the confident leadership of new Dean Annette Clark. We look forward to the start of the year for the rest of the students with about 975 eager freshmen coming our way, as many a 63% of them from out of state; the residence halls will be filled. They are reading in common a book on what the internet is doing to our brains; so that should make for an interesting discussion on the first day with their professors. The number of new transfer and graduate students are trending well and we are hopeful we will reach our full enrollment goals, and our School of Law is managing the downward shift in enrollment that is occurring across the nation in legal education. I like to remind people that altogether 2,000 students are starting at Seattle U. in our widely comprehensive university, not just the 975 freshmen.

Our Center for Environmental Justice and Sustainability, located at the renowned Bullitt Center, and the Institute for Catholic Thought and Culture are both moving into their first full year of operation. Our faculty are ready to deliver the new Core Curriculum for undergraduates which, besides engaging the students right off the bat in more focused courses, also better emphasizes global education, and doubles the science requirement of the previous Core.

We are all involved—and we invite you to join us—in a new major, multiyear capital campaign which will focus on a great new science facility and much-needed scholarships to make our education affordable to students. I’m going to dedicate 50% of my time to this campaign starting now and for many years to come. Please join me in this great endeavor, which will move Seattle U. into a new era of academic excellence, leadership and service.

We are massively increasing our already large investments in technology for educational and operational purposes as well as for student demands. Look for online and hybrid courses and programs to roll out by next summer and fall 2014. Similarly, look for a powerful new marketing and visibility campaign of the university to match and compel our educational ambitions and accomplishments. We are also giving focused attention this year on integrating career and academic advising, on a more intentional design for a transformative student experience, on financial planning, on campus safety, and on greater transparency and appropriate roles of governance and voice for our faculty, staff, and students. We are implementing the strategic plan developed last year, which guides the university for the next five years and focuses on academic excellence, the promotion of research and scholarship, affordability, deepening our educational partnerships with area businesses and nonprofits, careers and jobs, the Youth Initiative, technology, campus facilities, and the Catholic and Jesuit character.

I'm counting on this being a winning and recognition-gaining year of Western Athletic Conference competition for our teams. Look for winning seasons for both soccer teams, in volleyball, in men's basketball, and expect women's basketball to go deep into the NCAA tournament this year. You heard it here! I'm in my second and last year as Chair of the Western Athletic Conference, so this is a good year for Seattle U. to make its mark! The new street car will start rolling along the edge of our campus on Broadway linking us to Sound Transit, to the airport and to the UW. Seattle University is clearly on an upward trajectory and we are optimistically making plans for how to celebrate our 125th anniversary as a university in three years.

That sounds like a great year to me. The hard work of the past five years, the development of new leadership in the administration and among the deans, financial investment in the excellence of our faculty and staff, and the building of a great campus—all of this brought about by all of us together—allows us to look forward to this kind of year. If we can gain the financial resources and the needed physical space and facilities which our campaign seeks, we can have even better years and greater impact than this in the future.

What can we do for one another?

As we started our conversation as insiders in the president's office by asking each other "How are you?" so we can end the conversation by another matched set of questions: "What can I do for you?"

I'll let you go first in asking me, "Father, what can I do for you?" How president's love to hear that question! There are four things you can do for me: 1) give us your very best advice, guidance, expertise, and time; 2) invite others to join with you in getting behind Seattle U.; open doors for our alumni, students, and faculty; 3) be as generous as you possibly can—more than you thought you could—in our campaign; don't miss the opportunity because it only comes around once in a decade; and 4) if you are excited about Seattle U., then talk about it, spread the word, and buy season tickets to one or several of our sporting events, and attend lectures, musical and theatre performances on campus.

Now, let me ask you, “What can I do for you?” I’m a president; I’m a priest; I’m a public-speaker; I’m a proud Jesuit; and I’ve got some pull! How can I help you in any of these ways, or if I can’t, how can I find someone else to help you: a Jesuit, an administrator, a professor, a business associate, an alumnus? One way I hope you’d ask me to help you is to pray for you in my early morning daily prayer as I hold up this university and all of its people—that includes you—before God, and to bring you with me to our daily Jesuit community Mass.

* * * * *

Fifty years ago this coming Sunday, September 8, 1963—just ten days after Martin Luther King’s speech at the Lincoln Memorial—I pronounced my life-long vows as a Jesuit during a 6:30 a.m. Mass at the Jesuit Novitiate on the hill above Sheridan, Oregon. You do that not knowing where those vows will take you, but you know they are the way to that unknown destination. They have taken me to a very good place indeed, to something which that 20-year-old could never have imagined. The anniversary of that commitment adds to the deep feeling I expressed to you at the beginning of my remarks: a gratitude for the people of Seattle University which spreads itself like a cover over this community; and a profound sense of amazement at how great an instrument for good this university is in our hands and in God’s hands. Indeed this is a very good place to be, God willing, and to a very promising place to continue with you, my friends, to serve the compelling purpose of this university—a purpose grounded in transforming lives and igniting the human spirit for a just and humane world, God willing and with God’s blessing.