

Seattle University Staff: Mirrors of the Mission

All-Staff Convocation
May 22, 2009
Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

I have really looked forward to this gathering of all of the staff of the university and it has been the fulfillment of a pledge. Last Spring I convened an All-Faculty Convocation on the subject of “The Catholic Character of Seattle University’s Academic Mission”. It was for faculty and it focused on the academic dimension of our mission. At that time I promised—and I repeated that promise at the University Convocation at the start of this year—that I would invite all staff to a convocation in the spring on the subject of how the staff contribute to and engage in the mission of the university. Here we are. Thanks for coming. Let’s enjoy this afternoon together.

The title of my remarks to you—and I am looking forward to the comments of the respondents and your discussion—is “Seattle University Staff: Mirrors of the Mission”. I want to talk about how you do, how you are seen by students and faculty, how you can, and what are the opportunities for you, to mirror the mission of the university so that our students see the mission reflected in you and so that they see themselves reflected in you.

“Staff”

First a very important and necessary clarification. I am going to use the word “staff” many times in my remarks and frankly we use it too much around here. I understand it to be shorthand for the rich variety of persons who make Seattle University work: coaches, administrative assistants, directors of programs, advisors, counselors, moderators, librarians, accountants, gardeners, assistant vice presidents, human resource personnel, cooks, admissions counselors, plumbers, executive secretaries, registrars, institution research professionals, financial aid officers, campus ministers, fundraisers, alumni workers, electricians, cleaners, safety officers, healthcare and wellness professionals, technicians and technology experts, planners, construction overseers, trainers, residence life directors, collegium assistants, publications, marketing and communications people, mailing and reprographics and conference and events coordinators, maintenance and transportation folk, student activities directors, etc., etc.

There is no good way to say all of that in one word—and “staff” is not a good or adequate word—for all of them, all of you. It needs to blend with words like colleagues, professionals, educators, people who serve and support and lead, who make the whole thing we call Seattle University work. So when I say “staff” and when we say “staff” let’s think of this rich reality. Maybe a first point is to ask if we can find new words which better match the reality.

It takes all kinds

Everyone knows that you don't have a great university unless you have many different kinds of faculty. You need all the different academic disciplines and all the different angles on each discipline. Obviously. But it is just as true that you do not have a great university unless you have many different kinds of staff. My point today is that you don't have our kind of great university unless you have many different kinds of staff all of whom and each of whom in their own way mirror the mission. One somewhat rhetorical way of putting it is:

“No money, no mission.”

“No president, no pep talks.”

“No faculty, no philosophy, physics, or finance.”

“No staff, no Seattle U!”

As there are necessarily many different kinds of staff, there need to be many different ways of mirroring the mission, none of them quite the same for each different kind of staff. So could we talk of finance for mission, admissions for mission, advisors for mission, facilities for mission, safety for mission, coaches for mission, gardeners for mission, ministers for mission, administrators for mission, development officers for mission? Do we need to get more specific; or rather do you need to get more specific and figure out and tell the rest of us and show the students how your way of being part of that rich reality of staff is for mission in a way that is particular to you and uniquely needed and appreciated by the students?

What the students say

In preparation for this talk I had some fun. You know how I like to catch students unawares, arrest them out of their zone, and talk with them. Sort of “Ah hah, it's your unlucky day, Fr. Steve has got you!” Well I decided that I would take this to the max and that I would interview unsuspecting students precisely about the subject of this convocation. I'd catch a lone straggler with iPod firmly planted in ears, wave my arms, and get a listening for my interview. Or I'd plonk down and surprise three students at a table in the Library foyer, or four guys leaning on railings outside Bannan, or most shockingly three sophisticated and sleep-deprived Law students at a table at the Side Bar in Sullivan Hall. It would usually go something like this, “Hi, I'm Father Steve—(“Hey we do know who you are!”)—do you mind if I ask you a few questions? I'm giving a talk to all the staff of the university in a couple of weeks. Could you help me? The subject is how do staff contribute to the mission of the university. What is your experience, what is your contact with staff, i.e. anyone who is not faculty, what difference do staff make to you? Here are some of the answers I got:

- Law student, a guy: “I had a financial aid question and emailed it to the financial aid office. I couldn't believe how quickly I got an answer back with just the information I needed. So now I go to this person in financial aid, which is so

important to us in Law, and so impossible to understand, and that person has become like Mom to me and that is great.”

- Fourth year student; she’s wearing a “Zag” sweatshirt: “When my friends and I were frosh in Xavier we got to know all the facilities people there by name and we’d talk all the time and became like a group. What I experience that’s great about Seattle U. is that everyone here—and I mean everyone—treats you in the same way. There’s a consistency. You feel respected, that feels like mission to me, Father.”
- Senior, friendly, good looking guy whose name I should know but don’t: “Every night when I walk home, I go by grounds. There’s an older guy there, looks like he’s been kicked around by life, and we always say hi and stop and talk. It started when he saw I had a beat up old motorbike, same kind he had when it was new, and it’s taken off from there. Makes all the difference to me that there is this familiarity, friendliness; it makes my day.”
- Woman student in library foyer: “For me the best examples are the librarians.” (I ask: “You mean they are friendly?”) She; “Yeah, sure that, but more they are so knowledgeable! They know where I should look, how to make my way through the databases. That is so hard and they know how to help.” (One of the things I like about her response is that she can brush off and take for granted that they are friendly, implying that of course all staff at S.U. are friendly.)
- A somewhat older woman student trapped by me on the long walk all the way from Arrupe to Administration. “Father, the mission here is educating the whole person.” (She had an A+ in my book from that opener!) “I’m a commuter and a minority student and where I am most impacted by staff is in my Collegium. You know there are things you just don’t want to talk with faculty about—you know, Father, things like growth—but in the Collegium they staff create a safe place for me to talk about growth, whole person kind of things. And maybe I shouldn’t tell you this, but I’m also a work study student in the College of Education and the staff there create space for me to do some of my homework on work-study time. That counts.” (I was left wondering what she would have told me if we’d had another block or two!)
- Students told me about financial aid, career services, safety, library, departments, athletics, residence hall staff, students not respecting staff by the messes they leave them to clean up, admissions, grounds, etc. They kept on talking about staff who know how to help, ones they talk with, friendliness, consistency, the need for both students and staff to initiate conversation, say hi, make contact, the impression they get that no one’s job here is dreary or a drudge but is respectful, dignified, humane, personable, social.

- One student, one of the four guys leaning on the rail outside Bannan captured it well: “I don’t think it can be something in general that fits all staff in how they contribute to the mission. Each part of the university needs to think how it can show the mission of justice—for instance, grounds in how they don’t dump all kinds of stuff on the plants, another area in how they don’t waste our money, another in how they treat one another and have fair work conditions. My question—he said—would be how can each part show the justice of the university.”

Specifics

When I think of fulfilling the mission—and I believe when faculty think of realizing the mission—we tend to think in big terms, in overall goals, generalized concepts and practices. My biggest learning from my walkabout interviews is that students think of mission in terms of specifics, in terms of specific immediate needs, with specific people, at a specific location. When they ask the question of “staff and mission”, their answer is universally “staff and specifics”. We need to hang on to that and take that fundamental insight further, both this afternoon and every day here. How can we get specific in regard to our own work about mission?

A faculty person told me, “When I walk into the classroom, it’s the staff who make it easy for me to do so.” Another faculty member said, “They are the first face of the mission of this university that students see.” An administrator said, “It is the staff who create the whole context for the education and they are the real test that what is advocated about mission in the classroom is true.” All faculty admitted to me that not all faculty treat staff very well.

Doing our job well

What everyone said—faculty, students, administrators, staff themselves, but most of all students—is that the most important and irreplaceable way staff contribute to our university mission is by doing their jobs well, really well. Doing one’s job really well is not something other than the mission, it is doing the mission. That’s what students need. We as a university—I as president, faculty as professors, deans, vice presidents—need to hold up for recognition, make known, give examples, appreciate more how all that staff do, all they do well, is mission. This can be in direct contact with students or not in direct contact but making possible what all of us together do educationally, creating its possibility and context. This needs to be seen as mission and honored as mission. How can we as a university recognize this better, more consistently, more mutually, so that—granted the rightful place of faculty in an educational institution—there is no second place in regard to mission, no two classes in contributing to mission?

Too mission-focused?

I sometimes think that I have gone too far, that we have gone too far, in articulating and embedding our Jesuit educational mission in this university. Fr. Charlie Currie, the president of the association of the 28 Jesuit universities and colleges in the United States, recently said that no university equals Seattle University in how it has gotten its Jesuit mission together from all angles. In short, in Jesuit mission, we are #1. You find our mission at the entrance of every building; all of us know it; for all of us it is our guide and our pride. The recent Faculty and Staff Satisfaction Survey showed that—though we are low in other areas and need to get to work on them—we rank ourselves, you rank us, as “stellar, exceptional” in “connection to institution and pride”. You put us right over the top and higher than anything else in the entire survey in response to the statement “I value the Jesuit Catholic dimension of Seattle University’s mission, vision, and values.” All of our students—Law, graduate, undergraduate, certificate program students, day, night, or weekend—all of our students can tell you in their own words what our Jesuit mission is and even more clearly can tell you how much they value and love it.

I say that I wonder at times if we have gone too far in being genuinely and pervasively the most mission-focused university you can find anywhere, in that it so captives us and so raises our aspirations that many of us are left revved up and ready to roll and don’t know quite what I can do, what my part of this push is, how I can more directly and evidently manifest and make concrete the mission. It’s like acknowledging that the mission is affixed at the entrance of every building and at the head of every group’s plan or financial request, but asking how is it affixed in me, how am I an entrance for the student to being educated and formed in this mission, how, in short, do I as staff mirror the mission. May I suggest several things?

Suggestions

1. Staff as students

An overlooked reality about our staff is that many are not on one side of the fence and the students on the other. So many of our staff are themselves students, in the classrooms as students with students, taking advantage of the opportunity of taking courses, attending classes, and getting degrees free, or are parents of children who are attending Seattle U. with the tax-free tuition remission benefit, which comes with working here. So staff know in a first-hand way—or they can know if they wish—what “educating the whole person, professional formation, and empowering leaders for a just and human world” is all about from the student’s experience. You have less need to be told what our mission is for students because you also experience it as students. I know these educational benefits put pressure on your finding the opportunity for career advancement here or prepare you for service elsewhere as they do for all students. This preparation for service elsewhere is what we are about and should take pride in both for them as well as for you, when you so choose. When that happens, it is not our failure but our success. My question is more how does your experience as staff who are also S.U. students help you

to understand our students better than any others can and so help you to know who they are and what they need and so how you can deliver and mirror the mission to them? Do we take enough advantage of this unique and exceptional resource for implementing the mission in and through our staff?

2. Real world models

The second suggestion about staff mirroring the mission begins by asking the question, “Who most likely do our students look to in order to get a view of who they want to be and what they want to do?” I suggest that they are being educated to work, to have a career, to balance life and career, to do something worthwhile, to be employed in an institution with values. Well you are these persons at hand who do this, those persons employed in what they know is a value-based institution. My guess is that they are looking to see in very particular and specific ways whether you are happy in what you do, and they look for this in you more than in anyone else in the university. Somehow you are the closest-at-hand stand-in for the real world for them in their university and graduate years. When we propose that our educational goal is a person who is integrated intellectually, personally, and spiritually; professionally, socially, and religiously; I’m sure they have their antennae up to see if this is true and can be true in the real world, in you. This asks the question which we should all welcome of whether we mirror the mission in our own integration. I believe that our university students are incredibly attuned to this, look for it, know it when they see it, and are confirmed and formed when they discover it. That’s what they are really plugged into.

3. Opportunities for leadership

My third suggestion concerns staff as leaders. I know you ask the question of how you can exercise the leadership we espouse, where are the opportunities, and what resources are provided for becoming and acting as these leaders here within the university itself. In other words, how are you too enabled to be “empowered leaders”? Our satisfaction survey shows we have a lot to do in this regard in terms of shared decision making, being on the same team, mutual appreciation for what we do. Two comments on this.

First, experience is showing us again and again that where there is good, consistent, fair, openly communicating and listening leadership, those who work in a division or group or area with these leaders find plenty of room for their own leadership. It is not a zero-sum game; it is the opposite. Good leaders create space and opportunity for the exercise of leadership in those whom they lead.

Second, in asking how we mirror our mission in the exercise and opportunities for leadership, do we need to pay more attention to our own definition of leadership within our Jesuit mission rather than borrow an understanding of leadership from just anywhere. We officially believe, we profess, that the person who is integrated intellectually, personally, and spiritually is an empowered leader and influences others for good by relating as the person he or she is. We do not believe that leadership is something other than or added on top of this powerful integration. For me, what this asks—beyond how

much we ourselves are integrated in this way—is what is the quality of our relationship with one another (and perhaps with students). Isn't it in our relationship with one another that we exercise leadership, not sometimes and in some places or with certain responsibilities, but always because of who we are and who we are with.

At most Jesuit universities everyone knows a Latin phrase, cura personalis, “care of persons”, which articulates a fundamental way of being towards students. Cura personalis is often engraved on buildings, painted on banners, and highlighted in brochures. For some reason it has never caught on here, though the reality of care of persons is very much our own and in fact is the first of our listed values—“Care: We put the good of students first”. I would like to suggest that another Latin phrase, cura communitatis, “care of community” in the sense of shaping the whole communal context of our university and its education, is the primary area for the exercise of the leadership of staff. The care, husbanding and wifing, fashioning and protecting of the quality of the university's community is the most important arena for staff to exercise the kind of leadership which is in accord with our mission's understanding of leadership. If you use leadership to care for community you are directly impacting the formation of all of our students according to our mission. Let us all ask ourselves what understanding of our own leadership are we asking for and advocating. It too must mirror the mission.

4. Staff engaged with students

Next suggestion. I believe the time has come—especially if we ground our contribution as staff to the mission in doing our jobs well, responding to specific needs of students, mirroring for them what their Jesuit integrated education means in our own integration so that they see themselves in us, and in caring for the community which is the context of their educating—I believe the time has come and the kind of university we have become requires that we explore how staff can be more directly engaged with students in learning groups, in service learning, in projects on behalf of justice, in environmental practices, in faith and spiritual conversation, in the arts, in providing extra-curricular workshops for students on what staff best know and have skills in which students need. My walkabout interviews of students tell me they would welcome this. It will require a new permission and empowering of staff, some resources, some release time, and lots of creativity along with a dose of courage. This can be done without taking away from the priority academic requirements and responsibilities of the faculty or taking away from each staff centrally contributing to the mission by his or her job very well done. We all might just do our jobs better if we all had more contact with students. I know I do my job better because of this contact; student contact puts gas in my tank.

5. Explicitly Jesuit and Catholic

I believe you know—at least I hope you know—that we are moving into an era when how we are Jesuit and Catholic will depend more and more on a wide range of persons within the university who are knowledgeable about our Jesuit and Catholic tradition, are committed to it, and know how to witness to and foster it. We've always been Jesuit and Catholic. We will become Jesuit and Catholic in a new way, less dependent on Jesuits and more positively, inclusively Catholic. I find this a very promising development. I hope to live long enough to see it fully flourish. I believe it is our future, must be our future, more than I believe anything else about us.

All of you as staff are invited to share in and contribute to this dimension of mirroring our mission in this Jesuit and Catholic way. As you don't have to become a Jesuit to do it, so also you don't need to become a Catholic to do it. It is a learned ability, but all are invited to learn. The university is committing resources available to all of you and will commit more resources for learning to mirror the Jesuit and Catholic mission. There is Colleagues in Jesuit Education which is open to all, a friendly, familiar, community-based way of learning about and enhancing the mission. If you want to go deeper, we make available to about 30 staff and faculty each year the Arrupe Seminar, a year-long committed exploration of Ignatian Spirituality and Jesuit education. If you want to go still deeper, we subsidize a half dozen persons a year in the making of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius in Everyday Life, a year of prayer and guidance and community support. We have also set aside special resources so that all may apply to the Endowed Fund for Faculty and Staff Development in Mission for particular projects. Some accompany immersion groups internationally or locally; some others go on the annual trip to Nicaragua; some participate in national leadership programs in Jesuit Catholic mission. I invite you to consider seriously what you might do to learn how you could mirror the mission in this Jesuit in a new way and Catholic in a more positive and inclusive way.

Leaving a legacy

After these suggestions let me conclude my remarks with a more personal point about contributing to the mission. I believe all of us are blessed to be working during the best years of our lives in an institution with the kind of mission where we can leave a personal legacy by what we do. Most institutions are not like that. Hopefully Seattle University represents and embodies some of the personal values you hold most dearly and most truly. By having a purchase or grasp on some part of our mission—not necessarily on all of it but on some parts of it that are “you”—you can leave a personal legacy, a legacy of what you want your life to stand for, both in the lives of students and alumni and also in this university itself and how it sticks to and grows in the values of its mission. What a wonderful thing it is to be able to do that by the work of one's life as well as in one's family life. In this way we—all of us and certainly, as I hope I have shown, our staff—become the truest and best and richest endowment of Seattle University. As we seek to mirror the mission, may the mission also mirror us.