

State of the University: A Twenty-Four Year Retrospective

*-March 11, 2021
-Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.*

Intro

First of all, I would like to thank the Board of Regents who originated this annual State of the University address and who continue to sponsor it. This is one of the many good things the Regents do for the university. Let me also thank all of our friends, board members, advisers, donors, President's Club members, and alumni for being with us this evening as you have for several years been for this event.

Tonight's will be a different kind of State of the University because this is my last year as president. So I would like to do more of a personal retrospective over twenty-four years, showing where we have come from as a university, what has been most important over these years – especially for me – and how we are positioned for a Seattle university under the leadership of President Eduardo Peñalver.

The Start

I need to start by saying that before I accepted being president, I didn't know if I wanted to and also whether I could do it. I had come off being the Provincial of the Jesuits for the Northwest for six years, but didn't know if I wanted or could step into a more challenging, more public, and more fast paced role of leadership. I think I drove Jim Dwyer, the chair of the presidential search committee, crazy with my indecision and my need to further discern whether I would accept this responsibility. This was solved for me as a Jesuit quite easily because Bob Grimm, the new Provincial, simply said to me, "Steve, we want you to be the president." That did it. I was all in.

I was young then, 53, and am old now 77, 12 years older than any previous president has been. I was following on a great president, Fr. Bill Sullivan, whom I knew well and came to admire even more as I took on the responsibility and began to discover just how well he had done. The initials of Seattle U are "SU", and the first two letters of both our names happen to be "SU"; "Sullivan" "Sundborg." Maybe that's why for years people kept calling me Fr. Sullivan. He was the 20th president and I the 21st. He told me since he had done 20 years, I needed to do 21. I thought that was a good joke. I don't anymore. Eduardo, #22, you need to do at least 22 years; Bill and I have set the pace for you.

My first years were very difficult. It was all new to me. I had never even been a tenured professor. I had much to learn. The person who helped me the most was the wonderful John Eshelman, the Provost, who knew where every body was buried and had such a quiet, on-the-mark, good judgement that, because of how he spoke we nicknamed him "E.F. Hutton." But it was still hard. I remember calling a Jesuit friend and asking him how long he thought I needed to continue in this job in order to save face. We agreed that two years was the minimum sentence! In the summer after my first year, I had a heart attack. Not a good sign. I remember Jim Sinegal, the Chair of the Board, saying to me "Ok, Father, what do we need to do in order that you do not have a second one?" Somehow we began to do it; and I mean "we", especially a

close-knit Cabinet and a great board. I got my pace; I began to do things my way; I focused on mission; I held forums of open and direct, vulnerable engagement with faculty, staff and students; I began to say hello to every student I saw; I began to weave some humor – my kind, which sometimes got me in trouble – into my talks. In short I became myself, made it my own, did it my way. It worked. Here we are 24 years later.

I used to hate it when people would ask me, “Do you enjoy being president?” “Enjoy” is not the right word, too light, too thin. The job demanded far too much to enjoy; too many pressures; too many constituencies; too public; too exposed. But I found it worthwhile, meaningful, a great way of carrying out my Jesuit vocation and ministry; something that used all the gifts God had given me and I had developed, and then some. Somehow it became natural to me; what I was called to do; a big part of my identity. I may have difficulty crawling out of that identity of being a president when I head off in a few months.

Early in my term, the students created a project called “Shadow a President; Shadow a Student.” A woman student followed me in all I did for three days: Cabinet meetings; fundraising planning; budget shaping; talks; events; receptions; meetings. After one day she said to me, “Father Steve, I have two questions for you: How many decisions do you have to make every day?! And how long do you have to do this?!” I remember in following her around, I was embarrassed by how little I could comprehend her math class; and when she took me to Salsa Dancing practice in the laundry room in the basement of Bellarmine Hall, I was chagrined at how inhibited a dancer I was. I knew I’d better stick with being president!

The Campus

Looking back over 24 years I can only realize now what the campus looked like then and what it looks like now, how many buildings we have built, how much more open space we have created, how much we have brought the campus together as a harmonious and effective educational instrument of a Jesuit university in the heart of Seattle. Fr. Sullivan told me, when he handed over the reins, that he was leaving me “the modern Seattle University campus” and that I would not need to focus very much on new buildings and new facilities. Oh yeah? Let me see: how about the Murphy Apartments, Sullivan Hall, the Student Center, the Lee Center for the Performing Arts, Hunthausen Hall, the James C. Pigott Pavilion for Leadership, the Lemieux Library and McGoldrick Learning Commons, the University Advancement and Alumni Building, the Eisiminger Fitness Center, the Chardin Residence Hall, the Redhawk Center and O’Brien Athletic Administration Center, the Harding Building, the University Park, the Douglas and the Vi Hilbert Student Residences, and the fabulous Jim and Janet Sinegal Center for Science and Innovation?

If I inherited the “modern Seattle University campus”, then I guess we have built the “Seattle University Campus of the Future.” Eduardo Peñalver, do I dare say to you that you will not need to focus much on further developing the campus? No way can I say that. You can bring it forward in your 22 years just as much as we have in my 24 years.

We did it by great comprehensive campaigns and multiple specialized ones. How generous our friends and foundations and corporations have been in the \$167M campaign of the 90s and the current campaign for the Uncommon Good now at \$286M and still counting. That, plus the other smaller campaigns adding up to about \$100M, is a lot of fundraising. It reminds me of a

conversation in my first four months on the job. Linda Hanson, the Vice President for University Relations at the time, was sitting opposite me in my office one day when she said, “Father Steve, may I make a personal comment, and I hope it won’t offend you. You do not know anything about fundraising, but boy are you teachable!” I was. And that was the best compliment I have receive.

The Education of Students

I remember Fr. Sullivan feeling misunderstood when someone referred to him as the “Building President”, the one who built the campus. I would feel the same. Yes, it is a transformed campus, and that is an accomplishment and an enhancement and a foundation for the future, but it is only an instrument for the real transformation in the education of students in these years.

From everything I have learned about how our faculty teach and work with students and fulfill our value which states, “We value excellence in learning with great teachers who are active scholars,” I could not step back in the classroom and teach. I would not know how. The students are different, the educational needs are different, the future world for which our students are being prepared is different, how students learn, how they study in groups, and how teachers teach and facilitate learning has changed. Seattle U as a Jesuit university has always had what I call an “edgy education,” on the edge of where the world is going and where our students are going. Thirty-one years ago when I stopped teaching here and was thought to be a good teacher, I knew where that edge was and I knew how to enable an edgy education. I wouldn’t anymore. The education of our students has become transformed – even more than our campus has been transformed – and we are now at the point in a fast-changing world of needing to review and reimagine our curriculum in order to deliver “a Jesuit Education of Distinction For a Time of Change,” which is the title of our Strategic Directions. This after all is what we are about in these buildings, these classrooms and labs, on these playing fields and courts, in these residence halls, and these centers of community engagement. We are seeking to be “one of the most innovative and progressive Jesuit and Catholic universities in the world” which is our strategic vision. Innovative in how we create our education, progressive in how we progress with our students and with our times, empowered and value-laden by how we are Jesuit and Catholic.

This transforming education of students has over these years needed to be supported by – and has been supported by – endowed scholarships, chairs, professorships, centers of engagement and of distinction, given to us from the generosity of those who believe in our kind of education. Twenty-four years ago we had the Sullivan Scholars, the Bannan Scholars and the Sue Naef Scholars. We have added to them in these years the Costco Scholars, the Fostering Scholars, the Alfie Scholars and about 100 individually named, endowed scholarships not only for deserving student access to our edgy education but also for the success of these students seeing it through to their graduation and into their lives as alumni.

Today we are blessed to have 18 endowed chairs and 14 endowed professorships across and in all of our colleges and schools. These endowed faculty positions anchor and impact the whole of the education by research, by creative pedagogy, and by influence on all faculty colleagues. I think of names like Frank Shrontz, Genevieve Albers, PACCAR, Kathleen Sullivan, Don Horowitz, Khalil Dibee, Bannan, Tinius, Wright, Bushman, Johnson, Howell, Bertch, Sauvage, and most recently, Amazon endowed chairs and professorships. These assure not just the future

of our education but above all its quality and distinction. They are the pillars of a progressive education, ever edgy, ever better, ever deeper, and ever more Jesuit and Catholic.

New in these past two-dozen years is a full complement of centers and institutes and programs. Among them are the Center for Jesuit Education, the Environmental Justice Center, the Institute for Catholic Thought and Culture, the Executive Leadership Center, the Korematsu Center, the Indigenous Peoples Institute, and even the Fr. Stephen Sundborg, S.J. Center for Community Engagement. Equally important for a Jesuit education in the formation of our students are the athletic, counselling, residential living, leadership development, career and international services, multicultural affairs, disabilities, campus ministry programs at the heart of the university experience of our students and that they later most remember and say were most formative of them. For a Jesuit education you may – as I like to say – “get intellectually roughed up for life” by the academics, but you also “get socially, morally and spiritually shaped for life” by this full complement of Jesuit formational student experiences.

The People

In this last year of my service as president, I have increasingly felt that what is most important are the relationships with special people. I’ve learned to treasure and enjoy more the affections and gift of these people. I’ve stopped thinking of accomplishments and have savored the special friends at the university and of me over the years. I know that they are what I will most miss when I head off in a few months.

Jim Dwyer recruited me. He and Jan have been best friends of mine from even before I started. Bill Sullivan and John Eshelman got me going and started me in the right direction. I’ve come to appreciate just how great leaders of Seattle U they were. I’ve treasured all the chairs of the Board of Trustees who have been mentors and wise counselors: John Ellis, Jim Sinegal, Steve Hooper, Phyllis Campbell, Betty Woods, Bob Ratliffe, Nicole Piasecki. God bless them! And we had fun together over these years amidst all of our challenges. No university could have a better line-up of chairs of the Board. Trustees do business as well as hire and fire the president! I can relax more with the Board of Regents, perhaps my favorite group in the university, generous people who love and serve this university. How I loved Rhoady and Jeanne Marie Lee and their family, and so grateful to the whole Pigott Family and especially Ann P. Wyckoff, Lee and Stu Rolfe, Steve and Tricia Trainer, Terri and Joe Gaffney, Bill Sr and Mimi and Bill and Melinda Gates, John and Ginny Meisenbach, Alan and Mary Frazier, Dave Sabey, and esteemed alumni of international prominence such as Gary Brinson and Mohammed Alabbar. What a privilege over these years to know personally honorary degree recipients like Nelson Mandela, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, President Corazon Aquino, and Opus Prize winner Maggie Barankitse of Burundi. These have been years rich in people.

I have a daily practice every morning in prayer – and I mean really early in the morning at Arrupe where I make the first pot of French Roast coffee for the community – a practice of remembering before God, just holding them up to God’s love, all of the special people of my years. I have not, for instance, missed a day of naming to God each member of the Cabinet of Seattle U, the team I work most closely with. I think it makes a difference. I know it makes a difference to me just to hold them up in gratitude. They are at the heart of the university and in my heart so I want them, too, to be in the heart of God.

Certain unforgettable students stand out in my experience. Students who found their way to my office, to sit in one of the big leather chairs – which by the way need to be retired with me – sat there and chatted like friend to friend. Katie Dubik, the student body president in my first year, set the pace when, after we each shared our leadership goals of the year, she then shared with me a list of her personal goals for the year about fitness, food, entertainment, reading, friends, sleep, etc. and said, “So, Fr. Steve, where is your list of your personal goals for the year?!” No wonder students like this stand out! Or students like Osbaldo Hernandez – Ozzy to the students – who as an undocumented student partnered with me to push for the Dream Act, or Khaled Jaraysa of Bethlehem, whose family on his mother’s side lived there in Bethlehem before Jesus was born and who when I looked on him, I thought “That is what Jesus probably looked like!” or two later women student body presidents, Katie Wieliczkiwicz, and Kate Hannick. We had a gap of women student body presidents for more than a dozen years after Katie Dubik, but the lineage of Katie, Katie, and Kate more than made up for it. Women rule; Kates conquer!

The students were kind to me in saying how much they liked my talks. A group of them once told me, “Fr. Steve, we know and love all five of your talks!” I told them, “Listen up; I’ve got six talks!” A remark of parents I heard frequently on commencement weekends was, “Fr. I can’t thank you enough for who my daughter, my son, is.” Not “what SU has done for them” or “made them to be” or “who they have become,” but simply “who my son, my daughter, is.” I agree with these parents. I can’t thank God enough for who our students are, and by the way, for who their parents are too. I’m already missing the people of Seattle University in all their goodness. I know I’ll take them with me in heart and in prayer in the early morning with French Roast coffee.

The Soul

As we have looked in retrospect over these 24 years at the campus, the education of students, and the people of the university, I’d like to talk more about the soul of Seattle U that animates all of this. You can see the campus, the students, and the people, but as with ourselves, you can’t see the soul, but it makes all the difference to our university’s life, as it does in our lives, that there is a soul.

The soul of Seattle University is its Jesuit and Catholic purpose and character. This soul was infused into Seattle College at its conception in 1891, brought it alive and is still today the source of its life. It is manifested in the Jesuits of the Arrupe Jesuit Community who pray and worship and witness at the heart of the university even if we are now less than 1% of the total number of faculty and staff. Soul is not about size, but about spirit. The Jesuit praying heart of Seattle U has been unceasing over the past 130 years and is unceasing today. The soul of Seattle U is manifested in the dedication of a new academic year in the Mass of the Holy Spirit in our college church of the Immaculate Conception and the whole of the education of several years of our students celebrates its soul in the Baccalaureate Mass in St. James Cathedral. Daily the beautiful Chapel of St. Ignatius in its soft light and reflective quiet reminds us of our soul and is a tranquil place of refuge, stillness, and prayer for all of our community as well as for the community around us, especially from the medical centers that surround us. It is right that the most beautiful building on campus is the architecturally renowned Chapel of St. Ignatius. Close at hand to the chapel is another expression of our soul in the shrine to the Martyrs of El Salvador, witnesses who gave their lives for what a Jesuit university should be. Our Jesuit and Catholic soul is shown in the fact that we start all meetings and gatherings with a reflection, an

inspiration, an invocation, a prayer from many voices of many faiths. The soul shines brightly in the annual Mission Day of the whole community reflecting on what our Jesuit and Catholic mission calls us to be in education, in diversity and inclusion, in service, in the arts and sciences, in environmental justice, in spirituality and community. Some of my deepest experiences of our soul have been participating in communal discernments which seek to bring that soul to the light and to ask of the Holy Spirit what it wants us to do and where it leads us. The soul of Seattle University erupts in things like hosting the Tent City on campus; the Seattle University Youth Initiative; the very shape of our Jesuit core curriculum; the special service of each of our schools and of our athletic teams, of our alumni, faculty, and staff service days, and most recently and in a most wonderful life-saving way in the Swedish Covid-19 Vaccination Clinic at Seattle U which gave 49,831 vaccinations to extraordinarily grateful people.

Speaking of soul, Seattle University is a soulmate with other Jesuit inspired universities and projects around the world, and especially in Central America. We seek to serve more globally and perhaps more importantly to learn from other peoples around the world especially the poor and those who suffer injustice.

The soul of Seattle University bursts forth in celebration with students and family and university is our commencements – commencements of lives of service of our graduating students as alumni living our mission, animated by our soul infused into them.

In the biblical Book of Proverbs we read, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” In our book we would read, “Where there is no soul, the university perishes.” What we do read is, “Because the soul is alive, the university flourishes.”

The Hope

I realize, in reflecting on the State of the University in a retrospective way over the past 24 years, that I experience what I’ve always said I’d like graduating students to be and do: to live lives of hope filled with gratitude which motivates them in their service. Overwhelmingly I feel gratitude for what these years have been for me but more so what they have been for the university. Surely these years are a clear sign of God’s gift of grace along with my efforts and the efforts of all. “Unless God build the house, they labor in vain who build it.” God has been building the house of Seattle University; it’s a new house; it’s a house for a new age; it’s a house of hope. It’s a gift now to Eduardo Peñalver in his leadership of the university into that new era. The university has been blessed to be able to find him afar and to bring him back to his home territory of the Puget Sound. Who would have thought we would have found from afar a “President from Puyallup” with his distinction, experience, and values to lead Seattle U in this new era?

What gives us hope are the students themselves whether proudly holding their posters as they come to us with the words from their essays of what they hope their Redhawk education will be, or students graduating with that winning recipe of gratitude, hope, and desire to serve. These are not just college students. They are students of a new world, a new era, a very different future, needing what our Strategic Directions say we are: “A Jesuit university of Distinction For a Time of Change” The whole university – together with Eduardo – needs to figure out what education, grounded in Jesuit values, these students most of all need.

Our revitalized alumni, more engaged with their alma mater than alumni have been for decades, are a new strength and hope. They are responding to the special campaign of this year to win them back called “Our Moment for Mission: The President’s Challenge.” They are rising to the challenge, to living and serving the mission. I have been told that I have given out diplomas with my name on them to 49,871 alumni. I’ll cross the 50,000 mark easily this June. Eduardo, the next 50,000 are yours. I believe a significant force for the new era of and hope for Seattle University will be the engine of the alumni empowering where the university goes.

I believe that Seattle University is positioned for success: in the lay leadership it has developed across the university with their well-informed-and-loved Jesuit inspiration; with a fantastic capital campaign now coming to a successful conclusion that puts gas in the tank for the future; with the new Jim and Janet Sinegal Center for Science and Innovation opening as this new era opens, and with the campus coming alive again with students – undergrad, grad and law – streaming along our malls who have chosen our kind of education as the best education for the future, students greeted as they hurry along to class, or lunch, or sports, or work, or service, greeted as they go by a young new president.

In closing, when I look back over 24 years, I reflect on the one event that most stands out for me and which I now think prophetically is a guide to our hope, our future. That event was the meeting I had along with some members of the Pigott Family with Pope Francis in his private library in the Vatican, a meeting that almost miraculously came about all because one of the Pigott sisters, when asked by her son if there was anything they could do for her that they had not done, replied, “Yes, I’d like to meet the Pope!” So there we were, a few months later, a dozen of us, in a circle around Pope Francis for a 45-minute family conversation with a pope who so put us at ease that we felt we were swapping stories with Uncle Frank. At the end of our conversation, Pope Francis said, “There are five things I’d like to leave you with as a summary of our conversation.” He explained them in a simple way. They can readily be applied to the attitudes that underlie our mission on behalf of our students. I see these five points of the Jesuit pope as what can guide us on the deepest level for our future. They came from him in five Italian words. Let’s see what they ask of us as a university.

- Vicinanza: closeness. Be near to your students; be where they are; walk with them; listen and learn who they are; accompany them; be their neighbor; be close; be near. Vicinanza.
- Testimonianza: witness. Less by words – which they will ignore – and more by witness – which they will take note of – testify to them of your values, your love of them, your hopes for them. Testimonianza.
- Incarnazione: incarnation. Make the good news of the gospel real to your students, concrete, specific, enfolded, lived out, embedded in your lives and in their; touching their world as it is in a visible and real way as Jesus did. Incarnazione.
- Ospedale di campo: Field hospital. Teach your students that we all live in a war zone, with the wounded by poverty, discrimination, rejection, and lack of meaning lying all around us. So don’t offer them what they don’t need, but in their emergency bend down and dress their wounds. Ospedale di campo.

— Misericordia: mercy. It's all about mercy because it is all about God and God is all about mercy. Fill your university with mercy, let it brim over with mercy, let it be what underlies and inspires all you do so that your students and alumni live God's mercy to them in their lives. Let mercy be your one-word mission. Misericordia.

Let me end here in this, my final and retrospective State of the University, with these five words which might inspire our new era of Seattle University. Let me let Pope Francis have the last words for Seattle University this evening: vicinanza, testimonianza, incarnazione, ospedale di campo, misericordia; closeness, witness, incarnation, field hospital, mercy.