

## The Era of Our Educational Commons

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### Coming Back

We all look forward to this day when we come back together, all of us who make a Seattle University education possible, to see one another again, to greet, share stories, and get our bearings on the new academic year. I always think that more important on this day than anything that is said from this podium is what is said as we say hello to one another and pick up on the energy of each other in a new commitment in the work and calling we so love.

For me this year coming to this day and seeing all of you again here under the big tent is special because, as you may know, I had a ten-week sabbatical from the day after commencement till the first of September. Just as we have a “computer refresh program” on a three year cycle, so there is a “president refresh program” on the same cycle, though this is the first year I have been able to take it after twelve years and after the last six years of the capital campaign. So you are seeing a new “version”, an overdue and big-time “update”. I hope you don’t find the kind of frustrations working with me that some experience in getting used to a new—and supposedly better or improved—computer and operating system.

### Marker of a new era

Getting a bit of distance from Seattle U. has allowed me to have a new perspective on us which I want to share with you this morning. This year we will finish off that decade of 2000-2010 which our strategic plan called to be “A Decade for Distinction”. This is also the year we build the magnificent new Library and Learning Commons at the center of our university. I see the opening of the Learning Commons, common to all of us in what we do in our education, as the indicator of the achievements of the past decade and the marker of a new era.

I want to call the new era “The Era of Our Educational Commons”.

The word “commons” derives from the land at the center or edge of a village which belongs to all the people commonly and where all may freely graze their sheep and animals. That’s what the Boston Commons was. That’s the sense behind having a commons on a university campus. So our new Learning Commons is meant to be the shared learning space belonging to all of us and to all of our students. I am extending this meaning, using the opening of the actual 56 million dollar new Library and Learning Commons as a concrete—no pun intended—marker of the new era I am calling “The Era

of Our Educational Commons”. My point is that after the very hard work of the last decade and all that is being developed this year, we are moving into a new era of education which we have been shaping and will further shape this year, a Seattle University education which we all own, all design, all take part in, and all can enjoy.

I want to talk about the accomplishments of the past year, of the past nine years of the decade, what I see as the challenges and opportunities in the year ahead of us, and what I believe will characterize the new era, “The Era of Our Educational Commons”.

### Where we come from

You could say that we will have done a lot of uphill climbing in this decade, working steadily and rather strenuously to arrive at a point where our education can finally be what we have always wanted it to be. You could also say that we have only now arrived at an elevation high enough to see what our educational future can be. We can see the shape of it, the outlines, contours, its mass and range and high points. That’s why I say with confidence that we are moving into “The Era of Our Educational Commons”.

This reminds me of an incident this summer. I was in Rome and went out one day by train to explore a couple of hill towns in Umbria. I got off at a stop for the hill town of Trevi, about a mile distant from the station and rising up a thousand feet. I headed off that hot day on foot and started climbing up paths, stairs, steep alleys, precipitous cobblestone streets, sweating my way up toward the church and piazza which I knew would be at the top... towards what you might call their “commons”. As I huffed and puffed my way up I came upon a village woman sweeping the steps of her house. In my buoyant way I said, “Signora, è molto difficile salire, ma immagino che sarà molto più facile scendere.” (“Ma’am, it’s very hard climbing up, but I’ll bet it will be a lot easier coming back!”) To which she replied with a laugh, “Signore, anche una zucca può trovare la strada giù!” I wasn’t sure of that word “zucca”, but suspected I knew, and I was right. She had said, “Sir, even a squash can find the way down!” I’m just hoping that is an ancient Umbrian saying rather than her personal comment on me and my ability. After the climbing of this decade, the new era of our educational commons will not be a squash bumping its way down the hill, but it will be the most enjoyable, exciting, and fulfilling thing all of us as persons committed to education and dreaming of realizing the full potential of a Seattle U. education will be doing together, in common, educationally.

## Last Year

Before we look at where we are going, let us take a look at where we have come from. I left here for my refresh the day after commencement, the culminating day of what I know was by far the hardest year as president, because of the economic crisis, I had had and I believe the hardest year for most of us. We sacrificed together, we hung together and supported one another as best we could, and we made what was a hard year into a great year. Recall a year with:

- the spectacular Opus Prize celebrations and Mission Day which brought into focus and expression all that we and our students and our university are about;
- a year in which we laid the foundations for the academic strategic action plan, which builds on our university strategic plan and helps guide how we move forward on our strategic priorities;
- a year in which so many were called on and so generously responded to our university-wide self-study which is the best objective measure of where we really are educationally;
- a year in which the staff of Residence Life responded in an almost heroic way to an unforeseen overcrowding of our residence halls and pulled it off with grace;
- the topping off, beyond all expectations and against predictions in a tough year, of a capital campaign at \$169 million;
- an emotionally-moving honoring and thanking of Fr. Sullivan for 34 years of Jesuit leadership with us, even as we attracted several new Jesuits to our common endeavor;
- the publication of the first ever Community Benefits Report showing a \$580 million annual impact of our university on the local community and 185,000 volunteer hours in that community by our students and ourselves;
- a year in which we found ourselves among the top 15 universities in the country for the number of our Truman Scholars over the past six years, and one in which Professor Dan Dombrowski won the Alpha Sigma Nu award for best book;
- the best rankings ever of university, colleges and programs and a record number of fellowships and grants;
- a first year in Division One in which our athletic teams surprised everyone and won for us new recognition and support; and
- strong new leadership, energy, and creativity in program after program across the university.

Somehow we did all that—and I really mean we, all of us in this tent—in a year of difficult economic cutbacks, reallocations, the personal financial sacrifices of everyone here. We did it while holding together and supporting and caring for one another within a commitment to make this university a better place to work and to be.

### Building on “The Decade for Distinction”

Where we will go in “The New Era of Our Educational Commons” is made possible by that kind of year on top of all that the earlier years of “The Decade for Distinction” achieved. Try the following on for size and ask whether it is a record of distinction. Since 2000 we have:

- had a 30% growth in students, 75% in graduate students, a doubling of applications, and an increase of 33% faculty and 43% staff;
- our retention rate has moved up from 80% to 87% and is approaching 89% and our graduation rate from 61% to 73%;
- in this period 82 students were awarded national fellowships, increasing steadily from one a year to 21 a year;
- we initiated 10 new undergraduate degree programs and 9 graduate degree programs;
- we broke into the top 10 in our *US News & World Report* ratings in 2001 and are now solidly in that group; with spectacular climbs especially in Law, Business, and Engineering.
- These years are marked by new centers which are transforming the university: Education Abroad, Center for Service and Community Engagement; Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning; Magis-Alumni Committed for Mission; with special centers in almost every college or school.
- The Decade for Distinction so far has brought us the new Student Center and Pavilion, Hunthausen Hall, the Lee Center for the Arts; the new Pigott Auditorium; the Nursing Clinical Performance Laboratories in James Tower, the Cherry Building, the huge building which is currently our interim library, Championship Field, Chardin Residence, and the spectacular new Admissions and Alumni Building. The Decade for Distinction will bring us within a year the Law School Annex, the new Library and Learning Commons, and both a new student residence and a fitness center under construction. These are not just facilities; they are facilities for an education of distinction.

- I'm particularly proud of the Costco Scholarship students, the Fostering Scholars program, the First Generation Project, the unparalleled growth in underrepresented minorities and the fact that first generation student graduation rates in this decade have moved up from 62% to 74% and underrepresented minority graduation rates have gone up from 30% to 77%. This is what we are most committed to doing and we are doing it well.
- Or how about the fact that we now beat all benchmarked categories in the National Survey of Student Engagement in what makes for a great, demanding, satisfying education? And that for the last three years over 50% of our seniors in that survey give us a grade of "excellent"? I'll take it.

And just to round out the picture let me add that this is the decade of the establishment of Mission & Ministry, which leavens our education; the huge developments in Fine Arts in students, programs, and facilities; the transformation of the campus with art; the decade of the new mission statement which is universally adopted and used and applied in the missions in all schools and programs; the growth in Nursing education; the recognition of our College of Education as the best in the state; the much stronger centrality of science/math/engineering in our mission and with new facilities and more to come; our technological transformation; improvement in all areas of student services; the initiation and development of the Academic Assembly for faculty leadership in academic governance; and the much stronger presence, service, visibility and reputation of the university in the community and the region. Ten years ago, people used to say, "Seattle University is the best-kept secret." Not anymore! We are widely recognized as a university on the rise. Here's what *The Seattle Times* said: "We all have a stake in Seattle University's ascension."

- I think we all see clearly that what we determined would be a "Decade for Distinction" could not have been better described than precisely that as we move into its last year. I have also learned that 78% of our current staff have been hired since 2000 and 70% of our faculty are new since then. So, while building on the past, we are in effect a new and renewed community of educators with all that implies for passing on the tradition, assuring the mission, and creating the future with the gifts of who we now are.

### What makes the era new

If we step back from all that we have accomplished over these years, fulfilling the goals we set out, if we as it were take a sabbatical from it, to get a fresh look and perspective on it, I believe we can all see beyond this "Decade for Distinction" upon which the opening of the new Library and Learning Commons will put an exclamation point, the contours of the New Era of Our Educational Commons which lies ahead of us. What will make this era new?

First of all I see it as truly a “commons”. I do not believe we came into the last decade with anything like the common confidence we now share about our education and its quality as we enter this new era. We now believe in ourselves, we know who we are, we know what we want, we know our students greatly appreciate both us and our education, and the public has proven that it supports us, has confidence in us, and is willing to invest in us.

I believe we might have been laughed off the stage ten years ago if we had said we were out to win an award for a ‘Great Place to Work’. We are not yet where we need to be with that, but we can now set the goal and can learn from one another what needs to happen and can now happen for this to be true. I believe we have become an educational community formed around knowing how all of us contribute to a common mission we deeply believe in, so we can all enjoy our new educational commons. I know that more than wanting to get back from my sabbatical to my work as president, I wanted even more to get back to and to be with, speak with, learn from, laugh with, join in work with you the people, the community of this university. So first of all, the center of the new educational era is that it now can be and needs to be a true “commons”.

Secondly, I find in myself and I believe that we will find in ourselves a joy that comes from our common calling that we can now engage in the education we have growingly seen is possible and which we want. We are all educators though in different ways; that is our calling. Isn't it a relief and a joy that we can now spend less time and effort on building the infrastructures, the scaffolding of our education, and can now turn our attention, creativity, constructively, commonly to fashion what we want our education to be? I know that what I find great joy in is that what I see ahead of me is that I can now be more of an educational president. I believe that that is where all of us can now find our joy because it is not a wish or a dream but is now a possibility of realization and we have the material for shaping this education which we previously lacked.

My third refreshed perspective on the New Era of Our Educational Commons is let's use what we have worked so hard to gain. Let's now use all that our \$169 million capital campaign brought us: \$43 million of very much needed scholarships so we can get and help make successful the students of need, merit, and commitment we want; \$11 million of that for the first time for graduate scholarships; \$44 million for academic programs, three endowed chairs, seven endowed professorships, with more than a third of the campaign total raised by and for our eight colleges and schools; and a whopping \$52 million for new facilities for the new kind of education we are fashioning. How sweet it is to be able to move into a new era in which we can choose how to use all of this in our educational commons.

Yes, let's now use educationally what 21,000 donors, 384 of them you our faculty and staff, 14,000 of our donors first-time investors in us, let's use for the educational purposes they gave to us, these new resources. As we use their gifts let's remember they are not just for the sake of making us a great university but a great university which in educating our students makes a difference in our community; we provide nurses for vulnerable populations; we give foster kids a college education and a new chance on life;

we train and mentor new school principals; we bring into our law school students of commitment and of diversity no other law school has the means to make successful; we strengthen entrepreneurship and business ethics; and we bolster every college and school with resources for scholarship within our mission of making a difference in society. It's in the bank; it's time to thank; and above all it's time to use what is now ours for the new era.

### Reaping the benefits of planning

As we move beyond this year into a new era in a new decade we are not starting over or hesitant about what direction to take. We know who we are and where we are going; we need to shape together the new education for a new era in accordance with all we have done to set our directions and to define our trajectory. We have a clear mission: "Seattle University is a Jesuit Catholic university dedicated to educating the whole person, to professional formation, and to empowering leaders for a just and humane world." Every single word of that mission applies to every part, every degree, every program, every office, every service, every person of our university.

Furthermore, making this mission more educationally compelling we have said we will fulfill that mission by working so that "Every Seattle University student will experience an integrated Jesuit education for leadership." By this we mean that we will not be satisfied in how we educate unless we have done everything we can so that each student in his or her freedom realizes a coming together and a mutual enlightening of their academic-intellectual-professional-artistic education, with their personal-social-bodily-developmental formation, and with their spiritual, faith-inspired, justice-oriented, value-based commitment. To seek anything less than this kind of integration is to fail Jesuit education and to fail to produce the kind of leaders our education intends.

We have also defined the boundaries by eight strategic lines—so that you might say our commons is octagonal in shape. They are: academic excellence, global education, Catholic character, formation for leadership, Division One athletics within our identity, engagement of diversity, commitment to sustainability and technological transformation. Just as we can now put to use the precious resources gained by our recently concluded capital campaign, so also we can now put to use the precious labor of our university community in this planning for the future that is now upon us in the new era of our educational commons. Nothing we have gained and nothing we have planned will be lost.

I find it greatly providential that this year we complete our self-study and will be evaluated by the accreditation team in the Spring according to the mission, goals, and strategic directions we have set for ourselves. This year we will learn—according to the proper process for universities of peer review—how objective we are about ourselves. We can make the self-study and the accreditation review not something we get through, but a helpful path to the New Era of Our Educational Commons. Join me in thanking

Bob Dullea, the steering committee, and the people who did the hard work of developing the departmental self-studies, those who carried it forward at the school/college/division levels, and those who are working now to finalize the first public drafts of the university self-study. They are serving the future of our university and our education by providing a road map for how we can be a better university.

### An education in contact with real issues

When I look ahead beyond this year to the New Era of Our Educational Commons I see one major way in which I want our already quality education to grow. I want our education to be even more in touch with the real issues which confront our country and our world today. This connected education, education in contact with gritty reality, is true Jesuit education and is true empowering leaders for a just and humane world. How well are we educating our students in a United States which does not work for all of its people but only for some of them: does not work for 12 million undocumented people working among us, does not work for 45 million without health insurance, does not work for the growing number of the unemployed, the foreclosed, fearful elders, youth without a decent chance in our public schools, for the tens of millions, if not a hundred million, who are in practice discriminated against or excluded by the other two-thirds. We need even more and more to educate our students not only about but in contact with these realities.

How are we doing in the education of our students not for our world but for theirs: the world with emerging major players such as China and India with whom America must learn to be a partner, a world in which our students think the greatest cause ever—the cause of sustainability and the very saving of the planet—is their greatest cause not ours, the world of their technology not ours, their globalized, multicultural, interdependent world? How well are we as a religiously grounded university educating our students to find their free place to stand religiously, in accordance with their beliefs, in an American culture so fraught or antagonistic or indifferent or dismissive religiously? To be Jesuit means to be Catholic, but it means to be inclusively Catholic, and it means to be ecumenical, inter-religious, and unafraid to engage with religious atheism, agnosticism, or indifference, to respect all and to know, find, and to be committed to one's own belief and life-practice within this religious panoply. Are we educating our students in contact with this religious reality for which we have a special responsibility because of who we are as a Jesuit Catholic university?

I want us to be faithful to our kind and quality of education, what we mean by “a Seattle University education”, but to push this education into much greater contact with the real issues of the real world for our students, more their world than ours. I see this as definitional of our new era and of our educational commons.

### What's ahead for this year

This new era, which the opening of our new Library and Learning Commons will signal, will be shaped by the following things we can currently discern for the coming year:

- We will have in place an Academic Strategic Action Plan which will be the main fulcrum for the kind of academic future which we now envision and which only now is possible.
- We will design a new Core Curriculum which will be our primary educational statement of what we insist needs to be at the heart of our kind of education in this new era. How exciting a challenge that is!
- We will place new emphasis and give new resources to scholarship and research so that our scholar-educators have the opportunity to address the real issues of our students more knowledgeably.
- This will be a second year of very cautious use of our financial resources, taking a prudent view about our expenses and work positions, accepting some further sacrifices and reallocations as the economic crisis continues to affect us as it affects all. We can take advantage of this to ask always what is most important and most promising for the long term for us to do.
- We will confidently and boldly this year expand, coordinate, and incentivize our global engagement and education with resources, which are now ours, designated by a generous donor for this key part of our strategic development
- We will put new energies into our entire enrollment process, develop a long-term enrollment strategy, and provide stability and predictability to recruit, admit and make successful the number and the kind of students we want on all levels of our education. We all need to be part of our enrollment initiatives.
- We will review from top to bottom what is our students' experience of community here at Seattle University and how it ties in with and supports our overall goal of an integrated Jesuit education of leaders.
- We may have some challenges at the start of the year because of the Swine Flu. We are almost bound to. Let's be prepared for this, communicate clearly and informatively, and keep calm in the midst of it. Wash your hands. Cover your cough. Stay home if you have a fever.
- We will roll out for your consideration, input, and engagement a university-wide "Seattle Youth Initiative" focused on the communities and schools of the Central District and in partnership with them, enabling the participation of all parts of the university, making more real our students' education, and making a difference in the lives and futures of our closest neighbors.

- We will continue and move forward with our commitment to you to make this university a better place to work and to be, and with our commitment to you to learn from you how this can be done and what this should look like.

These are the things that I, as your refreshed and new-perspective president coming off a sabbatical, see as what we can do this year, what we can implement rather than plan, so that next fall when we open and rejoice in and put to use our new Library and Learning Commons at the heart of our campus and academic purposes, we will also experience that we have in fact moved into a new era of fulfilling our Seattle University mission in an education we all shape, contribute to, and take responsibility for and pride in that will be truly our “educational commons”.

### Freefall from a phone booth

I ended my sabbatical with four weeks at a Carmelite Monastery in rural England. The two dozen enclosed nuns—with Sister Lesley Lockwood, my former Executive Secretary, among them—got 28 straight days of my early-morning homilies. Other than that I was nearly in steady silence for four weeks, praying, walking the rural lanes each day for hours, even riding in a combine harvester bringing in the grain, eating what was given me each day from the mostly vegetarian monastery, and being the quiet, reflective, rather introverted person I more truly am. Most days I asked myself, “Steve, you are a university president, what the heck are you doing in this place on your sabbatical?” On the very last evening of those four weeks I walked three-quarters of a mile to the nearest phone booth to make a call to the rest of the world. The red British phone box stood three steps up on a grassy bank on the very edge of a single-lane country road travelled as much by tractors and hog trucks as by cars. As I came out of that phone box, pushing the reluctant door open, I lost my balance and footing and tumbled in unbroken freefall, sprawling hard and flat onto the wet, dark road down below: with no bones broken, plenty of scrapes, and painfully sprained ribs, I pulled myself up and limped back to the monastery. I knew then—when your president falls out of a red British phone box onto a rural English road—that it was time to get out of there, more gracefully to exit a former era and move into the new one, to come home. I’d like to think that was my rather clumsy and brutal breakthrough to a new era. It was in fact the fulfillment of that Italian woman’s saying to me, “Even a squash can find the way down!” It is time for all of us to pick ourselves up and to move ahead together, to cap off this “Decade for Distinction”, and to ready ourselves to enter “The New Era of Our Education Commons”. Join me at the Mass of the Holy Spirit on Thursday, October 1, at Immaculate Conception Church to pray for God’s blessing on this year and on all of us.