

State of the University 2018

- September 12, 2018
- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

Ever since the Board of Regents created and sponsored this annual State of the University Address and wine tasting I have looked forward to it each summer as the real start of the year. I will speak later to faculty and staff and I look forward to addressing those colleagues. I will speak to our new students and I look forward to welcoming them into our Jesuit education. Then I and other Jesuits will speak to all who gather for the Mass of the Holy Spirit, and I hope it will be the Holy Spirit who speaks through us. But before all of that what I most enjoy is this evening with our board members, those who guide and advise us, our donors, and special friends and ambassadors. This is the most welcoming audience because you are our longest-term friends and our most committed companions in our mission and our future. I find it is like starting from the inside and moving out: along with the faculty and staff you are the heart of the university, then new students, then all. This evening calls for and allows for a frankness on my part because you are insiders, members of the family. My goal tonight is to speak to you about the “Jesuit Soul of Seattle University’s Future”. My address will be like water, then following the example of Jesus at Cana, we will turn that water into wine in our wine tasting and fellowship.

Let me set the table for where we are as we begin this academic year at Seattle U.

- Enrollment is excellent. Students are preferring us, choosing us.
- We have an experienced, animating, new Provost, Shane Martin, as the academic leader of the university, deeply inspired by Jesuit values.
- Our campaign is moving forward strongly, crossing the \$200 million mark and maintaining momentum.
- We have opened a new student residence, Vi Hilbert Hall, and a new campus store.
- By the end of this year we will break ground on the Center for Science and Innovation, the most ambitious project twice over of any in our history.
- We are focusing on three important issues within the university community: enhancing our culture, widening shared governance in our decision-making, and continuing to become a university of greater inclusive excellence, diversity, and equity.
- Last year we had the best year ever in athletics and we plan on building on it this year and beyond as athletics becomes ever more strategically vital for the university.
- All of this will find its place in our biggest endeavor of the year, the designing and articulation of a new strategic plan for the next five years.

- And, perhaps last but not least, the university is aware that now in my 22nd year as president I plan to complete my service after 24 years and that this year and the next two years are an opportune time to capitalize on and leverage my connections, relationships, experience and leadership.

This is how the table is set at the beginning of this very promising, hopeful year full of opportunity. In this State of the University evening entitled “Envisioning Our Future”, I want to look to the future with you from a special angle. The word I love in that title “Envisioning Our Future” is the little word in the middle, “our”, for it is really our common future, a future we can bring about with God working with us and in us and through us.

I have decided to focus my remarks this year on “The Jesuit Soul of Seattle University’s Future”. I do so for several reasons. First of all, I have long held, frequently articulated, and firmly believe that while Seattle University has many characteristics, it has a single character and that is its Jesuit character or soul. Being Jesuit makes us to be the kind of university we are and gives us through our alumni the impact we have. Secondly, as we set about strategic planning this year, which will reach beyond my time of service, it is vital that being Jesuit permeate our strategic plan and shape how we go about fulfilling that plan. And finally, as we are engaged in a great capital campaign for Seattle University, to which people are so generously responding, I believe it is important that there also be what you might call a campaign for the Jesuit soul of Seattle University. As the capital campaign is proving successful because it credibly builds on all we have done as a university, so the campaign for the Jesuit soul of our university builds on how genuinely, credibly, and promisingly Jesuit we currently are because of how hard we have worked to assure this our defining character. We enjoy a prominent place among Jesuit universities in this country and beyond because of how comprehensively and confidently we are Jesuit.

Let me address what I believe our Jesuit soul or character calls for in a renewed way for the future and then let me attempt to bring my remarks together in a Jesuit vision statement for the Seattle University of the future.

The Frontiers

My first plank in my proposal about how Seattle University can strengthen its Jesuit soul or character as it charts its future deals with how, being Jesuit, we are a Catholic university. It is especially important that we be clear about this and know our specific witness and contribution to Catholics and to all people when the Catholic Church is rocked by its sexual abuse of minors and its cover up of those crimes. Faithful Catholics are justifiably dismayed, shaken and demand a reform of their church. Seattle University needs to be a part of that reform. As a Jesuit university we have a special witness to give in the present situation and in the future both within the Catholic Church and beyond. Those of other faiths or no faiths also are questioning how we are living out our Jesuit values.

We should start with the fact that our university is a Jesuit way of being a Catholic university. Not all Catholic universities are able to give our kind of Catholic education, to give our kind of witness, and to make our kind of contribution to the Catholic Church. We should embrace how

we are Catholic according to our Jesuit mission and are officially and repeatedly endorsed by the Church.

The simplest way of putting it is that as a Jesuit university we are meant to be the free and formative space where the Catholic Church meets the culture. We are meant to be on the edge—and to have an edgy education—that exciting and challenging edge where church meets culture, where faith encounters the concrete context of our world and its toughest issues. To be on that edge sets us up to be criticized from the center of the Church. We are not a parish where the Church meets the faithful; we are a Jesuit university where true to what we have been sent to do, and grounded in our spirituality and traditions, we meet, engage, dialogue with, and impact a culture which is increasingly secular and disassociated from faith or religion.

We have been sent to be at this place of encounter by the popes. Pope Paul VI famously said of the Society of Jesus and its works:

“(w)herever in the Church, even in the most difficult and extreme fields, in the crossroads of ideologies, in the front line between the deepest human desires and the perennial message of the Gospel, there have been, and there are, Jesuits.”

This mandate has been renewed by successive popes, and has been adopted in the official articulation of our Jesuit mission. While being grounded in the center of the Church, we are sent to be on the frontiers: the frontiers of unbelief, indifference, and atheism; the frontiers of science and ideologies; the frontiers of ethics and technological capabilities which challenge humane life; the frontiers of justice, migration, the environment, and human rights; the frontiers where we meet and learn from and serve the poor and the vulnerable. To be on these frontiers as a Jesuit university in our academic courses, our faculty research, our student commitments and service, in our programs and, therefore, in our reputation, is to be a Catholic university in a Jesuit educational way.

We can be a bit arrogant about being out there on the frontier, on the edge, if we are not grounded and centered in faith, in the gospel, and in the doctrinal parameters of the Church. But we cannot retreat to the center. The people of our Church and the people of our society need this witness of a Jesuit university in which faith confidently meets culture, where religion goes to where it is usually not found. Could there be a more exciting, a more challenging way of being a Catholic university, and a more necessary one in witness and service to people of today? It is easier to give this kind of witness when the pope is himself a Jesuit and shows in all he says, does, and is that from the very center of the Church he goes to the frontiers to meet all people in welcome and dialogue and compassion and challenge, and because he goes there he is criticized and he accepts it. We, too, should not be surprised to be criticized for living out this character of our university which takes us to the edge, to meet all people in welcome and dialogue and compassion and challenge—the frontier.

Being Jesuit in this way lies behind attracting the kind of student we do, the kind of faculty and colleagues we have, the donors and supporters who believe in us. This Jesuit soul shapes our curriculum, which can be called “edgy”. We are meant to be a bold university. As we like to say, “You don’t go out into the world when you graduate from Seattle University because you have never left it!” As we plot the strategies of our future, this bold and faithful Jesuit character

of the frontier, the edge, must inform our choices and how we live them out. Let's be confident in being Jesuit in this educational way.

“Jesuit Educated”

My second proposal for what is most important to guide the future of Seattle University as Jesuit is an appeal to retain and reinforce what has been the strongest mark of Jesuit higher education in the past and needs to be today, its exceptional and unique intellectual rigor. When a newspaper mentions that prominent persons are “Jesuit educated” they mean that these persons have been put through their paces intellectually, have been challenged in their presuppositions, can think critically, logically, independently, reflectively, deeply, know where they stand and why, are capable of communicating effectively, can apply thought to issues, and can move from thought to action. All of this is summed up in that simple phrase decades and centuries old, “Jesuit educated”. No other higher education system or set of schools has anything like this well-known mark and clear designation of intellectual rigor as does Jesuit education. It has withstood the test of time and proven itself worldwide. In all else that the Jesuit soul or character of Seattle University must mean for the future—whether in regard to justice, or spirituality, or engagement with issues—this intellectual rigor of being “Jesuit educated” must not be lost or overshadowed but must be renewed and bolstered, and frankly, trumpeted. Without this core of being “Jesuit educated” through intellectual rigor, all other marks of our Jesuit character are weakened and diminish our uniqueness and distinctiveness as a kind of university among other universities. Jesuit students and alumni must know how to think.

On other occasions I have summed up this mark of being “Jesuit educated” as “being intellectually roughed up for life!” A Jesuit education takes students apart in their thinking and assumptions and in what they take for granted from their culture. It roughs them up in taking them apart in order to give them the means, the logic, the perspective, the critical thinking to put themselves back together again mentally, intellectually, in their own way so that they know how and why they think what they do and can stand up for it. I see this intellectual mark of our Seattle U. education in alumni repeatedly referring to their philosophy and theology courses and claiming that the greatest impact of Seattle U. was that here they learned how to think. I find it in students who graduate from a Jesuit school to go to a university of more advanced education, who often comment that it was in the Jesuit school that they learned to think more than in the graduate one. This mark of Jesuit education is reflected in the seriousness of our core curriculum for all undergraduate students and in the critical and ethical requirements of our graduate and law programs.

The north star of being “Jesuit educated” for guiding the future of Seattle University will depend on the quality of our faculty, their collaborative collegiality in maintaining and raising our academic standards, the evidence of their own intellectual rigor in their scholarship, and our support of them in their free and full intellectual mentorship of and witness to their students. I am out to bolster this more traditional indicator of the soul of Jesuit education as much as other indicators because of what being “Jesuit educated” has meant to me personally in how I was “intellectually roughed up for life” and because I believe that in the long run it is the mainstay and the distinguishing mark of our kind of education.

In the future of Seattle University the traditional intellectual rigor of Jesuit education needs to be applied to new areas of importance. Primary among these are sciences and technology, and their interplay with ethics and the liberal arts, which are such hallmarks of our education. Our new Center for Science and Innovation will bring Seattle University more assertively into the new era we are all experiencing. We need both the very best in the sciences, in technology, in mathematics and engineering, in medical sciences, and all of these need to be situated, complemented and enriched by the liberal arts, the philosophical, theological, and ethical education of our students. This is what we should be good at. We have something unique to offer from our Jesuit educational tradition in the scientific/technological/ethical challenges of today and increasingly of the future.

The Society of Jesus in recent years has focused its mission on reconciliation, responding to the ever-more-evident need to overcome the hostilities and polarization between people and even our alienation from our planet. How can Jesuit intellectual rigor apply itself to these pressing needs? In addition, the Society of Jesus is calling all its institutions to promote a culture for the protection of all vulnerable people. How will “Jesuit educated” persons of the future create and promote that culture which is currently so lacking and is so needed? These are some examples of how the intellectual rigor of the “Jesuit education” student should shape the curriculum, the programs, and the resources for the future of Seattle University. We should encourage and support our students in their passionate commitments to social justice, even in their protests and actions, and we should equally insist that as “Jesuit educated” students they apply their whole education to these issues both to understand them fully and to decide how most effectively to address them. Because of how we support them to be “Jesuit educated” we believe in the impact they will have for the common good for all people.

Educating the Whole Person

My third personal observation of how being a Jesuit university should guide how we shape our future at Seattle University is the famous Jesuit claim of “educating the whole person”. Going to the frontiers or the edge of issues, and developing an intellectual rigor by being “intellectually roughed up for life” requires addressing the whole person of the students as they are, accepting and respecting them for who they are, honoring them in their identity, showing them a personal care as individuals in their total experience inside and out of the classroom—what the tradition calls *cura personalis*—helping them to know and live out of their faith or spirituality, giving them the opportunities for a healthy development of their bodies, inspiring and guiding them in service and in works of justice, and creating an environment and community where they can grow socially and learn to put the good of others first.

This education of the whole person is a tall order for a Jesuit university to pull off, a promise that is challenging to deliver on. It requires the concerted, intentional, collaborative and generous effort of all of our faculty, staff, advisers, mentors, career specialists, coaches, student recruiters, administrators, and inclusive excellence and diversity leaders. These colleagues in mission must appreciate the contributions of one another to the education of the whole person of our students as the fullest and most comprehensive quality of what distinguishes a Jesuit education. A Jesuit education is only a Jesuit education of the whole person of our students if the student activities director knows about and supports the faculty professor’s intellectual formation of the students,

if the administrator and multi-cultural director listen to and welcome the expertise and work of one another, if the athletic coach and academic mentor equally appreciate each other's contribution to the students' total experience, if the campus minister and the scientist know they are about same thing, if the Jesuits and the campus grounds crew share a common purpose, if the cabinet and the deans and the president engage and listen to and learn from the students and the students from them.

In a Jesuit university the whole is greater than the sum of the parts because each and all are pulling for and empowering one another. I think you can imagine how much this concerted, collaborative, generous support of one another impacts the students. The experience of genuine personal care within and by a whole community seeking the education of the whole person of the student teaches more than any single dimension of our education could possibly teach. It is precisely because in a Jesuit education we aim at the formation of the whole person within a collaborative community focused on the good of the student that it is so critical how we give one another the benefit of the doubt—another Jesuit principle—appreciate and celebrate what all do from their important contribution to the mission, and strive to have the special kind of culture among us that supports this Jesuit purpose. The comprehensive student experience in the total educational community of Seattle University teaches and forms what no part of the university on its own can do, and, when done well, distinguishes Jesuit education from other kinds of education.

Discernment

My fourth and final proposal for how being Jesuit should shape our strategic planning and future comes from our Jesuit tradition and is emerging in a new way in our day is that the key decisions of the future of Seattle University need to be made by what is called communal discernment or discernment in common. Most of what we do in the university on a regular basis or in ordinary governance is made by informed, responsible, accountable decision-making. We can do that better. But when we come to the key determinative decisions of what our education will be, who will be the students we will seek for this education, what priorities of justice we will pursue, how we will relate and belong within a special kind of committed community, and what kind of persons we aim our alumni to be in the world... these are decision which need to be made by communal discernment.

We have been developing this capacity of discerning our key directions in cohorts of Jesuits and close associates, with the Cabinet and Deans and with our Board of Trustees. (We are the only Jesuit university I know of which has attempted communal discernment with its Board of Trustees.) In essence, this discernment is a quieting process which gives time for the group to go deep in silence within themselves, below discussion, deliberation, question and answer, to how they are individually moved by the Spirit within, and generously and vulnerably to offer this to the discerning group in order to allow all voices to be heard, honored, and held, and with the help of the leader of the discernment to form a decision from how the group has been moved, before seeking to test and confirm the discerned decision in practice.

When I think of how many questions bombard us all the time and how many other people, institutions, competitive forces, finances, and the marketplace, and trends in our culture would

like to decide our future for us, I more firmly believe than ever that the Jesuit way of communal discernment is essential for being who we are as a university with a Jesuit soul and assuring that that soul shape and animate us in who we determine to become. Our Jesuit way of education is more needed than ever because of the way in which our alumni shape the world for the greater good.

I also want to say very clearly that the Jesuit education of our students most of all seeks to form in them through their total experience of Seattle U. the capacity to discern their own life choices in the chaotic futures they will encounter. As a Jesuit university—and perhaps uniquely as Jesuit among other kinds of universities—we will have failed on our promise to our alumni if they do not have this capacity for discernment in their own lives. We must help them while we have them to be present to the truth of themselves in silence so that they may listen to the voice within them when they are inundated by noise in trying to find their way forward corresponding to the truth of who they are. Discernment is our greatest Jesuit asset and treasure. Only the comprehensive and cohesive experience of students in academics, campus life, service, activity, leadership, and spirituality will be adequate to this great purpose of our kind of university.

Before summing this up let me conclude by thanking you for your service to Seattle University and your presence here tonight to allow me in my fullest attempt in 22 years to say as a president and as a Jesuit what I think the Jesuit character of Seattle University is and how that soul must inform our planning for our promising future so that our students will have the impact for good in their lives and world which is our ultimate purpose.

In summary, in my view a Jesuit university: 1) is bold and unafraid in being the kind of Catholic university that goes to the frontiers of issues in meeting the culture of the day, 2) stakes its central claim on an intellectual rigor so that students and alumni think for themselves, 3) forms students academically, socially, spiritually, bodily, and in service to others in a collaborative community of care, and 4) discerns from the depths of the Spirit how to implement these key commitments. If we follow these four Jesuit ways of acting from the soul of who we are, Seattle University will indeed plan and enact a very promising and distinctive future worthy of our past, our present, our students, our alumni, and ourselves.