The one constant in the annual State of the Union address that we can all remember hearing year in and year out is that famous first line—“the state of our Union is strong.” While that has been a debatable point throughout our history, just as it is today, President Obama stuck with this traditionally optimistic opening sentiment as he declared the state of the union is “getting stronger” two weeks ago before a joint-session of Congress. Most Americans probably wanted to hear our President say that even if we don’t necessarily believe it’s true.

So what should I declare in my first State of the University address seven months into my tenure as the University’s 25th President? How about “The state of our University is strong”? Or would you prefer “The state of our University is getting stronger”? What I want is your thunderous non-partisan applause! Hearing none, allow me first to congratulate our Sursum Corda recipients and to welcome our newest faculty and staff. To the newest members of our community, I’m very excited to be here at Scranton, and I trust that you share with me that enthusiasm. To our award recipients, simply a most sincere thank you for a job well-done, especially in contributing to the Ignatian mission of the University.

Today, in our brief time together, I would like to take a moment to situate our work in the broader context of higher education in America and then to ask what is unique about a Scranton education.

These are challenging times in higher education. Issues such as cost, quality, access, and accountability provide easy targets for both academic heavyweights and media talking heads. The academy may be adrift, as some notable commentators lament, and higher education is no longer affordable for many.

Over the course of the past two weeks, I have experienced my first round of annual meetings of a variety of higher education groups, all sporting wonderful acronyms. While each explored issues unique to a particular niche, one theme crossed all agendas—the cost of higher education.

Spurred by the President’s State of the Union address, the discussion at these national gatherings was in one part a circling of the wagons and in another an exercise in soul searching. Underlying it all was a growing realization that the economic pressures of the past several years are creating new and painful realities for families as they seek out options for a college education.

What does all this mean for us?

First, we must recognize and respond to our current students and their families when reduced income or lost employment stretch resources. We must continue to care for them, extending additional help whenever we can.
Second, we must recognize how cost is influencing college admissions. We have been blessed with record applications and record enrollment. We should not, however, assume that the past guarantees the future. Cost is a growing concern for families everywhere, and those we recruit will share these concerns.

For all of our families both current and future, we need to see the link between their sacrifices and commitment to their children and our sacrifices and commitment to keeping annual increases in tuition, room and board low.

While remaining affordable is vital to a Scranton education, it is the value of the transformative experience that we provide that makes all the difference. What universities claim to be teaching their students—specifically, to think critically, reason analytically, solve problems, and communicate clearly—is necessary, but not sufficient, for Jesuit universities. For a Jesuit university should ask more of its students by challenging them to make St. Ignatius’ charge—“to love and serve in all things”—their own. This is the “value added” of Jesuit higher education, and as economists remind us: Value-added features give competitive edges to institutions with otherwise more expensive products.

To deliver a transformative education in the Jesuit tradition requires the integration of academic, moral, and spiritual learning—the union of mind, heart, and soul. “Education of the whole person in the Ignatian style . . . helps students discover their vocation in life, above all their vocation to love and serve.” This project of self-discovery and discernment, including discovering “our deepest vocation” is a great challenge to all on campus: for students it causes great anxiety; for faculty and staff assisting students, self-doubt and caution often dictate. (I speak here from personal experience.) Aside from providing first-class training in Ignatian discernment, a Jesuit university must also be a place where the Catholic tradition is studied and understood. The vast richness of the Catholic intellectual tradition is our privileged asset and again our competitive edge. Keeping the faith is a no-brainer as we attempt to deliver a transformative education at The University of Scranton.

In this enterprise, we must all recognize our part. At every level of the University and in every corner of campus, we share in creating a unique and powerful experience for our students. More than anything else, we must ensure that the quality of this experience is never compromised and ever improved.

So these are challenging times but also times of extraordinary opportunity to reimagine the mission of the university or, in the words of Adolfo Nicolás, S.J., Superior General of the Society of Jesus, to “re-found ‘the universities of the Society.’ In my inauguration address, I asked “What does it mean to say that Scranton is a 21st century Jesuit university in North America? My answer: The University of Scranton—a Jesuit University—can and should excel in providing its students an education that is engaged, integrated, and global. This way of proceeding is by definition provisional and open to revision. But, to be sure, our University is well-positioned to read the signs of the times and to see the world with new eyes. Our current strategic plan—with those Ignatian themes of cura personalis, magis and rei solictudo—presents an integrated approach that will enable us to achieve our institutional vision: “[To] provide a superior, transformational learning experience, preparing students who, in the
words of . . . St. Ignatius Loyola, will ‘set the world on fire.’” In the crowded marketplace of American higher education, this is the line we draw in the sand, and it’s time to stake our claim.

Before we adjourn to eat, I want again to congratulate the Sursum Corda Award winners. Your recognition today is well deserved and you serve as an example to us all here at the University.

If you will permit me, I have just a few words of thanks. I promise just a few words.

First, let me thank the Provost's Office staff, most especially Peggy Burke for her diligent work putting today’s event together. There is quite a bit of coordination that goes into this event and I very much appreciate your efforts, Peggy.

Next, I would like to thank the Division of Human Resources for their work with the Sursum Corda Awards. This division handles all of the logistics around nominations and recognition for the awards. Thank you for all the good work you did to recognize these great employees.

Thanks also go out to the members of the physical plant. I am constantly amazed that we can have convocation like this in the afternoon and later this room will be set for a retreat renewal and at other times for dinners. Thank you for your hard work; you are a most important part of this University.

Finally, I would like to thank the catering staff and those who prepared our food day. We thank you for this delicious food and more importantly for giving people an additional reason to attend today’s event.

Thank you all for everything that you do here at our University.

I wish you all a blessed and grace-filled Lent. God bless you and God bless The University of Scranton.