2013 State of the University

Kevin P. Quinn, S.J., President

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Good afternoon. It is good that we gather in convocation as a university community. To our award recipients, Marian Farrell, Kym Fetsko, Barbara King, Brian Pelcin, and James Piazza, a most sincere thank you for a job well-done, especially in contributing to the Ignatian mission of the University. To the newest members of our community—faculty and staff—welcome. I remain very excited to be here at The University of Scranton, and I trust that you share with me that enthusiasm.

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 how we must work to maintain and enhance what is unique about a Scranton education.

Make no mistake: these are anxious times. Incomprehensible death in Newtown, inexcusable gridlock in Washington, and I’ll leave it to you to describe our city. Talk of guns, fiscal cliffs, and Article 47 distressed cities. In addition, how could we ever forget super storm Sandy? My head spins. And, of course, the world of higher education is not immune from this malaise of cynicism and despair.

I’ve just returned from annual meetings of a variety of higher education groups, all sporting wonderful acronyms. While each explored issues unique to a particular niche, three themes crossed all agendas—debt, technology, and globalization. While not new, conversation around these themes is now more urgent. A word on each is appropriate.

To identify ad nauseam the troika of rising college tuition, increasing student debt, and disappointing job prospects is old news. “Ability to pay” captures well that story. The new challenge to higher education is “willingness to pay.” Those families that may have the ability to pay are now questioning the value proposition of spending so much money when returns on that investment seem mixed. These families are more likely to shop around for a “bargain,” or to rely more on public higher education. In response to this new environment, private colleges and universities are searching for answers; for example, some have even reduced tuition with the hope of capturing these “bargain hunters.” What is our university to do?

I need not tell this audience what today’s word or, more accurately, acronym in higher education technology is: MOOC, or massive open online course. That some elite research universities now share their famous professors with the masses via the internet challenges all colleges and universities to consider the role of online education now and not tomorrow. Of course, online education is already here: our graduate school has more students enrolled in online than campus-based degree programs, and as we announced last week, our online programs are counted among the best in the nation. But what more should our university do with online education?
“Globalization” is one of the most fashionable buzzwords of contemporary political and academic debate. Mine is not to opine here about a more precise meaning for this elusive concept, but to highlight its ongoing importance in higher education discourse and practice. We live in a globalizing world, and our curricular and co-curricular offerings must address that reality. Again, I ask: what should our university do?

All is not glum. We have much to celebrate at The University of Scranton. I need not rehearse for this audience our university’s recent accomplishments: enviable national rankings, a dedicated faculty with much to give both professionally and personally, students who continue to succeed on the national scene and a campus transformed. Well, let me mention just one. A recent listing by U.S. News & World Report included The University of Scranton among the nation’s “highly ranked universities” that operate “most efficiently.” Scranton is among just five “Regional Universities in the North,” and one of just 40 colleges in the nation, recognized by U.S. News in this new listing. The list commends colleges “able to achieve the highest academic quality” while judiciously managing spending per student on “instruction, research, student services, and related educational expenditures.” Not bad. Now add to that: admissions remain strong, and our business model continues to work well. As your President, I remain quite hopeful and enthusiastic about what we do here because what we do is good. But I’m not naïve; we need to constantly improve. How shall we improve together?

Before attempting to answer that question, allow me to describe what we do well, in a few sentences. The University’s vision is to “provide a superior, transformational learning experience, preparing students who, in the words of Jesuit founder St. Ignatius Loyola, will ‘set the world on fire.’” In the 21st century, any transformational education at a Jesuit university should be engaged (providing students with opportunities for direct contact with marginalized communities), integrated (systematically melding academics with co-curricular activities), and global (encouraging study abroad and developing world immersion experiences). But what is at the core of the transformation that we envision in our students? Or how should we prepare our students to “set the world on fire”? So much could be said in response to these questions. Let me only begin a campus-wide conversation on our University’s vision by suggesting that any Scranton education must be rooted in our commitment to cura personalis—our care for students in their own uniqueness. More specifically, we must know our students well enough to be able to encourage them to discern their vocation, or if you prefer, their passion in life. They should come to realize that, in the words of theologian Frederick Buechner, “vocation is where [their] greatest passion meets the world’s greatest need.” Let us continue to make this so at Scranton, and so make St. Ignatius proud.

How can we do better what we already do well? Without getting lost in the weeds, let me volunteer a few proposals aimed at advancing the vision of our University.

1. **Shared Governance.** I propose that faculty, staff, and administrative leaders convene to discuss how to advance the notion of “shared governance” on campus. We need to govern well together so that new initiatives can succeed.
2. **Strategic Financial Planning.** Without question, financial and budgetary pressures on the University will only increase over the next few years. It is important to note that this pressure will exist even with continuing strong enrollments at the undergraduate level and continuing success with our on-campus and on-line graduate programs. The root cause for this ongoing pressure is what VP Ed Steinmetz refers to as a “structural imbalance.” Simply put—our expenses will increase at a faster pace than our major revenue lines due to the nature of higher education expenses, market pressures and other affordability constraints. Senior administrative leaders are currently working at identifying a process—call it “strategic financial planning”—that will allow the University to navigate through these challenges and best position it for on-going success.

3. **New Academic Programs.** To maintain, much less enhance, our place in a very competitive higher education marketplace, we need to identify new academic programs, including online ones. We should focus on the delivery of a current, compelling and competitive curriculum. For example, our planning and vision for the new Rehabilitation Center rightly includes curricular review with attention on the near, and not distant, future. I encourage faculty leaders to continue as the vanguard here.

4. **A Second Look at TCMC.** To be clear, the University already has an ongoing relationship with The Commonwealth Medical College (TCMC). The University and TCMC jointly offer a dual degree program in Medicine and Health Administration. TCMC students reside in University housing in the Hill section. And our students use TCMC’s brand new gross anatomy lab for their studies. That said, I continue to believe that a broader or expanded relationship, even an affiliation, with TCMC is in our University’s future best interests. I’ll have more to say about TCMC in the near future.

5. **Improved Athletic Facilities.** Given our Jesuit identity and academic reputation, our University can become a Division III school of choice for student athletes. We have already made important investments to expand our coaching staff. What we need now is improved athletic facilities. The combination of excellent coaches and similarly excellent facilities would create a more robust stream of academically gifted students, both male and female, who want to play intercollegiate sports. To that end, senior university leaders continue to plan how the University might finance and construct a state-of-the-art athletic campus in Southside Scranton.

In the crowded marketplace of American higher education, we need to stake our claim on what we do well, and how we plan to improve.

Before we adjourn to eat, I want again to congratulate Marian, Kym, Barbara, Brian, and James. Your recognition today is well deserved and you serve as an example to us all here at the University.

Also, let me celebrate those who made this event possible: Peggy Burke and the Provost’s Office staff for organizing everything; Tricia Day and her HR colleagues for their work with the Sursum Corda Awards; members of the physical plant who continue to amaze; and our catering folks who always feed us so well.

Thank you all for everything that you do here at our University.
God bless you and God bless The University of Scranton.