2014 State of the University

Kevin P. Quinn, S.J., President

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Good afternoon and, for those of you who have been away for Intersession, welcome back. As we all know well it has been a bone chilling January. My hopes remain high that February will bring an end to that — I confess that I am still getting reacquainted with the East Coast climate.

First, I want to offer my own thanks and congratulations to our three Sursum Corda Award Winners — Jim Gaffney, Sandy Watson and Sherry Edwards. Your collective University service spans generations of students. While we are deeply grateful for your faithfulness, we honor you because of your selflessness and caring. Thank you for the example that you set for us all. Congratulations again.

I also wish to acknowledge the newest members of our staff. We are invigorated by your energy and enthusiasm. Welcome.

Keeping with this glowing theme, let me highlight a few of the many recent positive events in the life of the University. Following a wave of national recognition to begin our academic year, we recently announced that our online graduate programs were ranked among the nation’s best and that our MBA is one of the top five financial values in the country. Throughout last semester and especially in December, our students, faculty and staff gave us many reasons for pride through concerts, community service and athletic success. In the case of athletics, I encourage you all to root for the Royals and Lady Royals as they continue their successful seasons.

Within the City, we joined all Scranton residents in thanking Mayor Chris Doherty for his dedicated service and in welcoming a new Mayor and City Council. I am pleased to report that Mayor Bill Courtright and Council have shared with me a strong desire to collaborate with the University. I have pledged the same as we seek ways to help the City to address serious financial challenges. The vitality of the City is critical to the University, and I hope that we can facilitate finding even more creative ways to connect the knowledge and expertise of our campus community with the pressing needs of our City.

As you all know, the University has had its own series of leadership transitions. I acknowledge and thank, for example, Pat Harrington, who began her service as Interim Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs this week. She joins Patti Tetreault, Interim Vice President for Human Resources, and Anitra McShea, Interim Vice President for Student Affairs, who have already begun their service and Robyn Dickinson who will move into her role as Interim Vice President for Planning/CIO in March.

It is natural, of course, for leadership transitions in several divisions to trigger anxiety. In our case, we are blessed to have such capable people willing to help through this period. Our search for a permanent successor to Hal Baillie is well under way, and I remain hopeful that we will successfully conclude this
search in the coming months.

In the cases of the other divisional areas, I am taking this opportunity to consider carefully how best to proceed.

In other developments, I was pleased to provide the campus community with an update on the substantial work that has already been done to respond to our warning by Middle States. I want to thank our faculty union, faculty-at-large and academic leaders for moving swiftly and seriously to put the University on the path to address Middle State’s concerns for the long term. Our students will be well served by our focus on assessment and improvement.

The collaborative way in which we are responding to this challenge reinforces the need for continued discussion around shared governance. I am committed to engage in this conversation in the coming months as we strive to capitalize on our strengths as a community through a deeper understanding of the roles and responsibilities of faculty and administration. To that end, representatives from the Faculty Senate, faculty union and senior administration will begin a “conversation on shared governance” on February 13. Three additional sessions are already scheduled. As we initiate this important project, I am reminded through our Middle States response of our common commitment to our students and to the mission of the University.

The times in which we undertake our work are, however, tumultuous. An emphasis on outcomes and analytics can be found everywhere and, as I shared last year at this time: “...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.”

We experienced a taste of this through a smaller entering class of first-year students. We know now that financial considerations topped the list for many families who chose not to enroll at Scranton last year. For the coming year, we are taking steps in admissions and financial aid to address these challenges. At the same time, we must continue to recognize the long-term implications of what is happening in higher education today and must identify strategies that are appropriate for Scranton to address them.

For the short term, the essential need to limit tuition increases and the implications of our smaller class are putting tremendous pressure on our budget. We are confident that we will craft a balanced and strategic budget for our Board’s approval, but the process is not without sacrifice and painful decisions. It is for this reason that we remain committed to a combination of strategic enrollment and strategic financial reviews to ensure that our educational offerings remain in high demand and to find solutions for our budget pressures into the future.

For the current admissions cycle, I am happy to report some early positive signs. Applications are again near record levels and, in a very important measure, visits to campus by high school seniors are at an all-time high. We have, however, much to do. As the admissions cycle moves into the all-important “yield”
phase, I encourage all members of the University community to continue your support of our efforts through your participation in Admissions events and programs and through your warm Scranton welcome for all of our guests.

As Pope Francis reminds us: “One of the more serious temptations which stifles boldness and zeal is a defeatism which turns us into querulous and disillusioned pessimists, ‘sourpusses.’” Speaking of our new pope, preaching about “a joy ever new, a joy which is shared,” he was again in the news last week.

There is an early 70’s top-ten hit by Dr. Hook that preaches about what it meant to be “on the cover of the Rolling Stone.” I immediately thought of that song when I heard the news that Pope Francis, the Argentine rock star, would be on the cover of Rolling Stone.

As with most popular songs from my youth, “The Cover of the Rolling Stone” lyrics are very deep:

Well, we’re big rock singers
We got golden fingers
And we’re loved everywhere we go. . . (That sounds like us)
We sing about beauty and we sing about truth
At ten thousand dollars a show. . . (Right)
We take all kinds of pills that give us all kind of thrills
But the thrill we've never known
Is the thrill that'll getcha when you get your picture
On the cover of the Rollin' Stone.

And the words on the cover are lifted from music icon Bob Dylan: “The times they are a-changing.”

The University of Scranton is always changing, always renewing itself without losing focus on its mission. And that mission is to promote personal transformation among our students that would lead to transforming society. The ideal of a personal transformation requires a rigorous education to prepare students to become ethical and compassionate leaders who will infuse society with faith and justice, informed by knowledge. For personal transformation to be effective, academic, moral and spiritual experience must be integrated with and enhanced by learning outside the classroom. But it must be experiential learning in which immersion and reflection on experience are intertwined and focused on the needs and concerns that many in our world face.

By integrating accompaniment, spirituality, academic excellence and community, our educational strategy will lead university students to a depth of thought and imagination that are distinguishing marks of the Ignatian tradition. The Jesuit difference in higher education is not just what students know but who they become: men and women of adult faith, of competence, for and with others. At our University faculty, staff, students, community partners and indigenous peoples are dynamic partners in the process of promoting personal (and societal) transformation. Here’s a partial list of how we do this:

- Professors Josephine Dunn and Nathan Lefler again offered their Catholic Intellectual Tradition Seminar during intersession. This long-running seminar allows professors from different disciplines to investigate the riches of our intellectual tradition together.
• Pilgrimages to El Salvador and Ambos Nogales (for the Kino Border Initiative), plus the Nicaragua Faith-in-Service Trip, are designed to forge connections in “service of faith, promotion of justice” for faculty and staff.
• At least ten International Service Program trips provide opportunities for students, along with faculty and staff, to experience the “gritty reality” of countries in the developing world “so they can learn to feel it, think about it ethically, respond to its suffering, and engage it constructively.”
• In partnership with ARAMARK, 130 members of the faculty and staff volunteered to serve 568 guests from the City and region for our fifth annual Community Christmas Day Breakfast. It was our largest ever.
• Answering the Scranton Diocese’s call for help in staffing a local soup kitchen on Tuesday evenings (issued in early December), faculty and staff responded most generously and all Tuesday slots until early April were filled within 48 hours. More folks (and entire departments) continue to sign up.

Our Catholic and Jesuit mission is a reminder of our focus throughout this year on celebrating the 125th anniversary of our founding. I know that other activities and events are planned for the coming months, and I encourage you all to participate. We are also in the final stages of producing a hardcover history of The University of Scranton, a project that has been undertaken through devoted service by current and emeriti faculty and staff. I am deeply grateful to the planning committee and to the many groups and organizations on campus who have so warmly and thoroughly embraced our celebration.

As I close today, I want to acknowledge again our honorees and thank all those who have helped to make our gathering possible.

God bless you all and God bless The University of Scranton!

Endnotes

1 Francis, Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium (24 November 2013), 85.
2 Ibid., Index, I.