Good afternoon and let me add my welcome to all of you.

Whether you are a rookie or a veteran, this time of year is very special for all of us. As we begin another school year at this important place, I’d like to share with you some thoughts on the coming school year.

Congratulations to Terry Sweeney on receiving the Jack Earl Award. Terry, you are a fitting addition to the list of Earl Award winners and a shining example of teaching as a vocation. Thank you for all you do for our students and our University.

To Jack Beidler on fifty years of university service, well done!

Finally, to all the new faculty and staff members, thank you for joining us. You have made a wise decision to join this University. I look forward to working with you in your new roles.

As we begin a new school year by welcoming the Class of 2018, I’m reminded of what Peter Hans Kolvenbach, former superior general of the Jesuit order, famously expressed in October 2000: “The real measure of our Jesuit universities lies in who[m] our students become.” At The University of Scranton, we must not lose this focus. Powerfully and succinctly put, “[a]s a Jesuit and Catholic university, our primary mission is the education and formation of students in such a way an in order that they become men and women of faith and service to their communities.”¹ This is how our graduates will do whatever they choose to do; this is the value-added of a Scranton education.

But we can’t bury our heads in the sand. I need not remind you about stories making headlines in higher education. “Cost continues to top the list of concerns for [President Obama], Congress and, most importantly, the public. [The President] will be drawing further attention to this issue with a White House Conference on the subject planned for January.”²

As we know only too well at Scranton: “assessment has become a major concern for higher education. Increasingly, regulators and accreditors are moving away from input models and instead are asking, ‘What is the country receiving in return for the billions being spent on
higher education and how do we know if it is effective?’ Learning outcome-assessment has become the basis for determining institutional effectiveness. However, the availability of valid, widely accepted tools and methods needed to determine learning and skill acquisition are proving hard to come by.” And from Forbes online, we read—perhaps with some satisfaction—that “[a]ccreditation has become the ‘piñata’ of both the political and policy communities. Few of those who are critical of it understand the present system, a big part of the problem. However, before any meaningful reform can be undertaken, there needs to be agreement as to whether the present system is ‘too difficult’ or ‘too lax’ and whether the desired end state is a regulatory enforcement body or one of quality assurance.”

Given the quality and creativity of our institution, these challenges, while real and serious, need not be understood as negative. Rather, they present an opportunity to re-examine closely our mission and the presumptions and practices with which we approach that mission. We will need to be clear on what it means to be a Catholic and Jesuit master’s university in these uncertain times. To that end, we must carefully examine the steps and practices we should take as an institution to support and improve our operation, and to implement our conclusions.

Before commenting on the future, allow me a brief update on the present. First, I want to highlight an issue of central importance to me. In the past academic year, faculty, staff and administrative leaders convened to discuss how to advance the notion of “shared governance” on campus. I met with faculty and staff senates in plenary sessions during the fall, and participated in several structured conversations with Faculty Senate and FAC leaders in the spring. I especially want to express my thanks to these faculty leaders for our fruitful conversations on shared governance in which we engaged. I was very glad to have participated in this important process and welcome suggestions from faculty (and staff) on how to advance the experience of shared governance on campus. To be sure, I remain convinced that we need to govern well together so that our University may prosper.

I’m pleased to report that the Class of 2018 has surpassed all of our expectations. Last weekend, we welcomed a class of 1,086, the largest in our history, surpassing the previous record of 1,054 students set by the Class of 2015. Drawn from the second largest applicant pool in our history, the Class of 2018 is talented and diverse, with quality indicators at or above the past few years and with a student of color population of 16.4 percent. This weekend we also welcomed 80 transfer students and more than 250 new graduate students, both on-campus and online.

As you all know, the University experienced a number of transitions in key leadership positions during the last academic year. I reported last February that these vacancies were an
opportunity for me to ensure that we are using our resources in a most effective manner. The
appointment in May of Donald R. Boomgaarden, Ph.D., as our new Provost & Senior Vice
President for Academic Affairs, was a key milestone in a larger administrative restructuring
process that happened over the summer as result of this opportunity.

Dr. Boomgaarden officially began his tenure at the University on July 1st. He is a
distinguished scholar, educator and administrator with more than 30 years of experience,
including a decade serving in teaching and leadership positions at sister Jesuit schools. I’m
delighted that we have identified a person who displays the kind of creativity and deep
commitment to students, faculty, and Jesuit education that are at the core of our success.
Welcome, Don!

As an aside, I expect there will be some opportunities for entertainment at various
faculty events this year given Don’s musical skills. I’m certainly looking forward to the first
“faculty club.”

In terms of the larger restructuring that happened this past summer, I’ll not rehash the
specifics of the restructuring here but will just reiterate my reasons and hopes for the new
structure. Since arriving on campus in 2011, I’ve had concerns about the number of University
vice presidents, the number of my direct reports, the size of my cabinet and the flat
organizational structure in Academic Affairs. With these concerns in mind, I launched an
exhaustive review into all these areas. I’m grateful to the groups that shared feedback during
this important process, most especially, the senior leadership team, the Executive Committee
of the Board of Trustees, and leaders of the Faculty Affairs Council and Faculty Senate.

I believe we have created a leadership structure that focuses resources more explicitly
around the University’s aspiration to create a unique, powerful and transformational
experience for our students—one that is engaged, integrated and global.

Academic year 2013-14 saw a renewed emphasis on assessment of student learning.
The Middle States warning underscored the need for our continued vigilance on assessment,
and during the Spring 2014 semester, departments and colleges worked together to
demonstrate their commitment to developing a sustainable program for assessment of student
learning. Since mid-April, a faculty committee worked closely with Dr. Linda Ledford-Miller,
Faculty Assessment Fellow and Ms. Kate Yerkes, Middle States Liaison, in the preparation of the
Monitoring Report to document the University’s response to the Middle States Warning, and to
demonstrate our ability to meet the requirements of Standard 14. The report, submitted on
August 28th, will be followed by a site visit from the Middle States team in mid-September.
In response to the Middle States requirements, several important steps were taken. Following the recommendations described in the Middle States consultant’s report, The Office of Educational Assessment (OEA) was established as a resource for faculty in the assessment of student learning. The OEA Director, Dr. Mary Jane DiMattio, and the five Faculty Assessment Fellows worked through the summer to prepare a work plan to identify institutional assessment priorities and timelines for the coming academic year. The 5th Floor of O’Hara Hall is the home of the OEA and will serve as a resource and meeting area for faculty seeking support in assessment activities. Faculty senate representatives will serve on the Assessment Advisory Committee to inform and support the activities of the new office. In concert with CTLE, several summer assessment workshops were offered to faculty, and Dr. DiMattio and Dr. Harrington presented on the topic of the “OEA and assessment” at the annual academic department chairperson’s retreat.

The OEA Team asked me to extend their gratitude to you (the faculty) today and share their appreciation for the comprehensive and enthusiastic response of the faculty, departments, and colleges during the past year. To the faculty, I say thank you too. OEA will offer assistance to departments and faculty to ensure that, in addition to meeting the Middle States requirements, the University will be able to assess student learning in a sustainable and effective way. They look forward to working with you to achieve the goal of a comprehensive approach to assessment of student learning.

On a more practical side: construction work continues on yet another signature building on campus: our new eight story, 116,000 square foot, Center for Rehabilitation Education. We expect the building to be entirely enclosed by mid-December so that the structure can be heated and interior construction work can continue during the winter months. The project is on budget and remains on schedule for substantial completion in July 2015. We are confident that it will be ready for classes for the fall semester 2015.

Permit me to conclude with a comment about the future. This academic year marks the last of our current strategic plan for 2010-2015: Go and Set the World on Fire. Our University can be proud of the work we have done to fulfil the goals and strategies of this plan, in particular those efforts related to the commitment to and cultivation of the transformational learning experience we provide our students.

Even as we begin the final stretch of one plan, we are undertaking to build the next. The purpose of strategic planning is helping complex, dynamic organizations like our University navigate change and set common goals and priorities for the future. I, like you, look forward to a new strategic plan. Thanks to the ongoing work of our University Planning Committee in its stewardship of our planning and institutional effectiveness model, a good bit of the
groundwork for our new plan has been laid. This work has relied on the thoughtful analysis and discussion of institutional strengths, opportunities, and challenges as identified from multiple constituencies, and it has made clear a central theme shared by our faculty, our students, and our staff: a singular, strategic focus on providing the best possible student learning experience, and recognition that it is that experience that has the potential, above all else, to make the University distinctive.

Throughout this academic year, we will engage in discussions to build on this initial thinking, identifying clear priorities and desired outcomes, and the necessary support plans to achieve them are in place. The process will be shepherded by the University Planning Committee, which, under the leadership of Dr. Don Boomgaard, will serve as a Strategic Plan Steering Committee. The members of this committee will assist in engaging those groups they respectively represent in the planning process. It is my hope that this process is open and engaging, and that it will result in a strategic plan that will invigorate us all.

Before we adjourn to eat and drink, I want again to congratulate Terry. 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; 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.

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Notes


3 Ibid.