Dean's Address to the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences
Columbia Room, Werner University Center
September 17, 2019

Below is the script for Dean Kathleen Cassity's address to the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences. It is not a direct transcript of her remarks.

Good morning, everyone, and welcome back!

The other day, a colleague and I agreed that one thing we enjoy about being in the field of education is that "back-to-school" feeling we get every September. Even when the weather is like it is today, autumn brings the promise of a new beginning, no matter how many challenges we dealt with the prior year. I admit, sometimes that optimism doesn't last very long. Sometimes it only takes a few days for that whole "back to school, it's going to be a great year" mood to evaporate and it's more like, "Ugh, not this again." And yet each fall I still feel a resurgence of hope. By hope, I don't mean false optimism. We will always have challenges, both internal to our university and in the wider world. Yet each new academic year brings with it the possibility of renewal.

We are working diligently. I want you all to know that I see how hard you are working, and I appreciate it. Yesterday President Fuller outlined the progress we've made on many fronts, in the past two years alone. That's meant a great deal of work, on top of your already substantial duties. This has also meant change, which can feel unsettling. We hope that the work we've done, and will continue to do, helps to build a sustainable future for our university.

But as we all know, education is not an endeavor in which we reap the rewards of our efforts instantly. When you sign up for this gig, instant gratification and immediately tangible end products are not part of the deal. Perhaps that is why over the summer, I developed a strange interest in pressure washing our deck. All that mess, instantly gone, and I get results *now*! Unfortunately, education is not like pressure washing. We are in this game for the long haul, and when it comes to making a difference in our students' lives and in the wider world, we often have to rely on trust, realizing that the full extent of our contributions may never be completely known.

Last weekend I dug out my last two fall dean's addresses for inspiration, because the last two times I had a cool story to start with and this time, I don't. What struck me as I read them is that we're still working on the same issues, and the same themes I discussed then are still relevant. In my first year, I talked about coping effectively with change. Last year I focused on the importance of effective communication. Those issues are still so pertinent that I briefly considered recycling one of those speeches just to see if you'd notice. But I decided to do the right thing and prepare something new. Since I don't have a story to kick off with this year, I will start by saying: We are living through difficult times. We are all struggling with something, and none of us are protected from the craziness happening in the world around us.

An image often used as a metaphor for education is the "ivory tower," yet that image isn't quite accurate. Not only are we a little short on ivory (and elephants) around here, we do not dwell in a tower that is elevated above and protected from the rest of the world. We are not Rapunzel; we are very much on the ground. Yet too many people distinguish between the university and the so-called "real world." Why is that? The world we inhabit here is, in fact, real—sometimes all too real. We don't dwell in some ethereal, other-worldly realm, as much as I would sometimes like to. So why are we so often seen that way?

That question has fascinated me for much of my life, throughout my many years as an outsider to academia and now my almost-as-many years as an academic insider. It's something I often explore in my own reading, writing and thinking, and this summer that led me to read a new book entitled *Generous Thinking: A Radical Approach to Saving the University.* The author, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, is in my own field of English. Today I want to share with you just a few of the insights I've gained from that reading.

"Generous thinking" is defined as "a mode of engagement that emphasizes listening over speaking, community over individualism, and collaboration over competition." The goal of generous thinking, in our context, isn't just for us all to be nicer to each other, though I certainly won't argue against that; it is for universities to build stronger relationships, not only internally but also externally with the public we serve. Central to this goal is the question of how conceptualize our roles as educators: Do we exist primarily to confer prestige, or is our mission to contribute to the public good?

I'm going to explore that idea today, and as I do, I want to acknowledge that here at Western, we are doing a lot of this work already. This is who we are. We already engage in this type of relationship-building more than many institutions. Yet there is still more we can do, and we can also be more intentional and purposeful as we do it.

Fitzpatrick's hypothesis is that many of the struggles we currently face in higher education are rooted in an increasingly widespread cultural belief that education confers a *private benefit* rather than a *public good*. As that assumption that education primarily benefits the individual has grown more pervasive, so has the notion that those individuals who benefit directly should pay for it themselves. This assumption has contributed to the sharp decline in state funding for public institutions, which has happened everywhere, not just here. This in turn leads to rising tuition—which then makes the university seem, to many, even more out of reach, and out of touch.

As public universities become increasingly tuition-driven, costs skyrocket, leading to increased student debt. It is then perhaps not surprising that students increasingly gravitate to fields that offer training in specific rather than flexible career paths. (As many of you may remember from my speech last year, I prefer to characterize skills as "specific" or "flexible" rather than "hard" or "soft.") Scarcity of resources then pits programs against each other—in institutions that are already primed for, and structured, by competition over cooperation, and individual success over the collective good.

All of this creates a downward spiral: As access to higher education becomes more challenging, it becomes easier for the public at large to perceive college education, particularly in certain fields, as a "frill." Many perceive what we do here to be of little practical use—"not real." Many believe the university exists primarily to serve the egos of those of us working here, and/or that our primary role is to stand as self-appointed gatekeepers of the pathway to economic success.

A few days ago, I heard someone in a professional setting refer to a college diploma as "just a piece of paper." Naturally, I bristled. I was tempted to say, "You know, money is also 'just a piece of paper,' but nobody ever thinks we don't need *that."* But I held my tongue and instead went off on a silent internal tirade, telling myself, "This person is so wrong," and mentally preparing my line of attack.

But before I could delve too far deeply into my own reservoir of self-righteousness, I realized I could hear whispering—the voices of some of my own prior selves.

There was "the smart kid" me, whom everyone (including myself) assumed was college bound, but whose family hit some bad luck when I was in high school, taking college off the table. There was the 20-something, voc-tech trained paraprofessional me, who worked every day with college-educated people and couldn't for the life of me figure out what they had that I didn't have (some of them didn't even know how to spell!—and that made me feel pretty superior). There was the 30-year-old college freshman me, terrified to set foot on campus that first day of fall quarter. In addition to fearing the prospect of sitting in classrooms with 18-year-old party animals, the place was huge and foreboding and felt like someplace where the uninitiated would not be allowed, where they used strange Latinate words like "colloquium," whatever that was. There was the developing college student me, who was intimidated by—and, I admit, more than a little envious of—people who had been able to go to college at age 18. They got to live in on campus in a dorm. They got to eat dorm food! I wanted all that. I didn't get it.

One prominent writer on higher education topics once described the college experience as "an opportunity to stand outside the world for a few years, between the orthodoxy of your family and the exigencies of career, and contemplate things from a distance." Well, isn't that special. Not all of us get the luxury of "standing outside the world for a few years" to contemplate much of *anything* from a distance. Some of us are just hurled into the world, and we contemplate situations while living very much inside them, *if* we're lucky enough to have time to "contemplate" at all. Not everyone is that lucky. Ultimately, I was one of the lucky ones.

It's now been 28 years almost to this very day since I first set foot on that campus. Even though I no longer experience the gulf between academic outsider and insider within my own psyche, I still remember it. From my current vantage point, it's tempting to say that this gulf is entirely the fault of those outside academia: it's because we have an anti-intellectual culture, or because of politicians, or because of late-stage capitalism—or many

other explanations. While there may be grains of truth in all these narratives and more, such rationales place the responsibility entirely on the Other. What Fitzpatrick challenges us to do is push beyond external explanations: to engage with the public using generous thinking, "broadening our notion of who our 'peers' might be, creating a much larger 'us,' not set in opposition to 'them'—to "create the possibility of working together to build something entirely new."

Her point resonates with me because in my now 28 years within the academy, as my own personal sense of the gap has narrowed, in society that gulf seems to have grown wider. Now, it has always been there. This I know. I was raised during the sixties and seventies inside a religious community that was suspicious of all secular education, especially college. (One certain relative told me periodically, "You don't need to worry about going to college—it won't make you a better wife, and it certainly won't make you a better Christian!") I then joined the work force during the late seventies and eighties as a non-college-educated person, where I felt every single day that the workplace was inhabited by a secret club, one that I wasn't part of. So yes, I know in my bones that we have always had that gap. If someone had asked me for my passport on the day I first walked onto that college campus, I would not have been surprised; the place felt at least as weird to me as Canada.

Nevertheless, today that gulf is worse. And what we sometimes don't want to see is how we, however unwittingly, might be perpetuating that divide through some of our own unexamined and unchecked assumptions. Here are a few to consider:

- When it comes to quality of education, there is a hierarchy of institutions;
- We are not situated very high on that hierarchy;
- Ergo, our students must not be at the top of the heap;
- The corollary, which we may not voice out loud: that perhaps this means *we* are not at the top of the heap either;
- That the best way to measure our "educational outcomes" is to gather data on our graduates' earning capacity (or to point out that somebody who graduated from our institution is famous).

If we buy into these assumptions, consciously or (more often) subconsciously, we are acquiescing to the widespread belief that while the real benefit of a college degree is not just a piece of paper, it is also not merely about conveying knowledge; it is about conveying *prestige.*

Consider the college recent admissions scandal. Were the parents who photoshopped their children's faces onto photographs of star athletes, or who falsified their children's test scores, generally doing this because they really wanted their children to learn a lot? I would guess not. This was about perpetuating privilege, through the bestowing of prestige. And here Fitzpatrick makes a particularly interesting point, if we look at the root word of "prestige." (Bear with me because I'm an English geek, so I'm super interested in root

words.) "Prestige" comes to us from the Latin *praestigium,* which means "a delusion or illusion."

Prestige isn't real. Think about that for a minute.

So much of what traditional academic thinking trades in—how institutions perceive the quality of their students, or the validity of their faculty's successes, or the importance of a particular diploma—is based on illusion.

Perhaps that is part of why many people think of college as not being part of the "real world."

Many have pointed out that the traditional university has its roots in the monastic model, set apart from the rest of the world for purposes of contemplation—the Oxbridge paradigm, handed down to us from medieval England. That paradigm is also vertical, competitive, zero-sum, a model that imagines only "so much room at the top." It is a model that confers not only the illusion of prestige, but the belief that success is a zero-sum game; that my success has to mean your failure, or vice versa; that bell curves are inevitable. ("I know I'm a good teacher if my class is so hard that nobody can pass it." "I know I'm a great writer if my work appears in publications so obscure that nobody reads them.")

This is a paradigm that—often without admitting it—holds outsiders in disdain. It is grounded in "me" rather than "us," and it privileges those who best survive the hazing necessary to get to "the top," rather than those who prioritize building community. In this model, there is only so much to go around. (A caveat here: when it comes to material resources, often there only *is* so much to go around. Like it or not, that's a reality we have to contend with, and I will say more about that shortly.) If that's truly what higher education is all about, no wonder we're losing ground in the public imagination.

But, Fitzpatrick points out, the monastic, prestige-driven hierarchical model is not the only possible paradigm for higher education. If we think back to the United States in the mid-19th century, a much different model was developed with the founding of our land grant universities and normal schools. These institutions had a different mission—a community-directed mission. This is the legacy we have inherited here at Western, a commitment to service and community. *Generous thinking.* This is what we were founded to be, and this is who we still are.

But the current pressures we are under—that all of higher education is under—can make "generous thinking" a challenge. Under pressure, none of us are at our best, whether individually or as institutions. Under pressure, it is easy to fall into the zero-sum model, to buy into the illusion of prestige along with its shadow, resentment.

Fitzpatrick asks: what if more universities viewed our collective purpose as problem-solving through dialogue with the wider community? This should not be done in a colonialist way, in which we are the experts from on high bestowing our wisdom on an

unknowing and needy populace, but in a spirit of true partnership and mutual exchange, where everyone values and learns from what the other has to offer.

As it happens, that same person who caused me to bristle by saying the college diploma is "just a piece of paper" also said something with which I very much agree: Education does not convey value. As human beings, we all have value. I would argue that an education worth the paper it's printed on does not merely convey marketable skills—though it certainly does that—but it also helps us to become ever more aware of the bigger picture, and of the core of humanity we all share.

Right now, in the world around us, dehumanization is on the march. All the cruelty we are currently witnessing or experiencing (or both)—the bigotry that has been let loose, rooted in the colonialism and slavery that haunted our nation and betrayed its values from our inception; the fetish of technology as an end in itself rather than as a tool for improving human lives—all of these problems have their roots in dehumanization. Our goal, as educators, should be to re-humanize our world. That includes ditching the sometimes-unexamined belief that education bestows more intrinsic value upon those who have obtained it.

Higher education does a great many things, all of which I believe in. I may believe in it more than most; I gave up a successful career, made considerable sacrifices, and radically changed my life just to have that opportunity. The importance of education is deeply embedded in my being. Yet those who have had such access are *not* more valuable as human beings than those who have may have had different opportunities than we had, or who simply may have made different choices than we made. When you think about it: How are we to become more inclusive, more diverse, or more humane, if the basic paradigm that structures our collective existence is a key engine of perpetuating social stratification?

Now, the material resources that we all need *are*, all too often, zero-sum games. How we can balance our multiple and competing needs is one of the most significant challenges I face as your dean, and finding effective ways to do that will be one of my top priorities during the coming year. Yet, even as I work to balance the books and advocate for your needs, I want us all to remember that many things that we *should* value here in the university are *not* zero-sum games.

Kindness is not zero sum. It doesn't even cost us anything. Learning is not zero sum; it is possible for *all* of our students to learn and succeed, if they choose to do so (bearing in mind that they also have agency). Sharing our knowledge more widely doesn't diminish it. Quite the opposite, in fact. Gathering and building our knowledge from more sources, including other cultures, indigenous peoples, female perspectives, minority perspectives, does not "dumb us down." It raises us all up.

Resource allocation and budget balancing remain significant challenges, for some of our units more than others. This year I want to advocate for conceptualizing our university as an ecosystem, in which we are all interdependent. For the university to succeed, we all

need to be here, and we all need to contribute. To invoke a different metaphor, last weekend I saw a great meme from Lin-Manuel Miranda (author of *Hamilton*) which I'll paraphrase: "To the altos and the baritones in the choir, to the viola players and trombonists in the [orchestra]: Your melody is not the one the world sings … but the song falls apart without you."

In order to keep our ecosystem/orchestra alive, I will work with many of you in the coming year to help you develop strategies for sustainability. I can advocate for all of you more effectively when you are also doing all that you can do on your end. As we seek to forge solutions to the various challenges we face, I won't be issuing directives, but I will be posing questions and making suggestions, and we will develop initiatives through dialogue.

The long-term fix, of course, requires generating a sufficient and reliable revenue stream. Our student enrollment has steadily declined since 2011. State funding for higher education has taken a nosedive, as it has everywhere. Meanwhile, costs have gone up, hand in hand with increasing governmental and accreditation mandates, often unfunded. Many of the changes presently underway at Western are in direct response to these challenges.

But just complaining that we need more resources is not going to be enough. I believe the revenue puzzle is directly linked to that issue of public perception—to that gulf I referenced earlier between academic insiders and outsiders, and to that pervasive image of the university as an "ivory tower," separate from the so-called "real world." If we want to increase our revenue, whether through enrollments or state funding or grants or donations—ideally, all of the above—we would do well to engage with the public through generous thinking. That will help us get to the root of this problem, not just the surface, and to deal with reality, not illusions.

This is going to be a big ship to turn around, but I don't believe it's an impossible task. As I said earlier, Western is already far ahead of the curve when it comes to generous thinking and community engagement. We are poised to be leaders in this work. As I advocate for you, I will encourage all of us to do all we can to continue building community, both within our institution and with the wider public—because, ultimately all of these challenges are related.

To make this happen, I welcome your ideas. My own ideas tend to be sort of English professor-like, and in the coming year you might expect to hear about some initiatives regarding book clubs, public blogs, and other reading and writing endeavors. Yet a couple of hundred minds from 24 different disciplines (of which I understand exactly one) can come up far more good ideas than one mind alone. So I'll be consulting with all of you throughout the year, and I welcome you to come to me with suggestions. Not every great idea needs to cost a lot, and how we work through budgetary constraints is a point on which I will also welcome your suggestions. This year we will continue with brainstorming, as we engage in generous thinking. There is so much innovative energy in our faculty right now, and I find that exciting.

Considering all we have done already, I believe Western Oregon University is exceptionally well positioned to engage in generous thinking. It's within our power to build positive relationships with our community, and to model generous thinking for others. In the process, perhaps we can bring back the concept of public good, and of higher education not just as an individual ticket to wealth or to that illusory thing called "prestige," but as a transformative process that changes all of us for the better and serves the public good.

Will it be quick? No. Will it be easy? No. But serving the greater good is always worth it.