

DEAN'S ADDRESS
Fall 2021
Delivered both live and via Zoom from the Columbia Room
Tuesday, September 21, 2021 – 9:15 a.m.

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Welcome back. In spite of everything, welcome back.

I want to start by acknowledging that we are gathering here today, a few of us in person and more of us virtually, in a time that continues to be marked by uncertainty, stress, and significant loss. In the past year, two of our faculty members passed away—our Business & Economics Division Chair Hamid Bahari-Kashani, and our NTT Assistant Professor of Biology, John Laundre. Collectively we have experienced many additional losses, some of which are still in process—layoffs, departures and retirements of both faculty and staff, discontinuation of some programs, and continued uncertainty.

As if all that were not enough, I know that many here at Western have lost loved ones within the past few months, some due to COVID and some due to other causes. Many have watched loved ones suffer from illness, and of course some in our community have been ill themselves. All of us are on edge, especially those who have underlying conditions and/or vulnerable family members. Then there are the usual slings and arrows of outrageous fortune that life hurls at us even during the best of times. Those things haven't stopped.

Given all that, I was initially thinking it might be appropriate to begin with a moment of silence. But then I came up with another idea: a moment of music. Yesterday our Western Oregon Chamber Singers, under the direction of Dr. James Reddan, recorded two songs for us to listen to this morning. In honor of those we have lost, and as a gesture of support and comfort to those of you who have suffered losses and stresses over the past several months—these short performances ([HERE](#) and [HERE](#)) are dedicated to you.

Last year, I addressed you all on Zoom from my home office—a room I grew *very* tired of occupying. At that time, I stated my hopes for Fall 2021, and here is a direct quote: “I hope by this time next year, we will once again be gathered in the Pacific Room on a rainy day, eating those miniature scones and catching up on each other's news.”

Well, best-laid plans and all ... We are not in the Pacific Room. At first it looked like we might be, but curse you, Delta. (In case you're wondering, we're in the Columbia Room because it's wired for Zoom.) Even worse, we do not have the miniature scones. Those of you who are logged in remotely can take heart in knowing that you are not missing out on the scones. You are also not missing out on free coffee, such as it is. And it's always supposed to rain on the day of the Dean's address, but our fickle Oregon weather couldn't even get that part right. Then again, maybe the sunshine is a good omen.

Because it's not all bad. Unlike last year, I am not in that home office anymore, thank goodness, and I am actually standing upright. That's a start. And, there are *people* in this room—not many, and I'm not sure which people they are because I can only see half their faces—but that's another start. We may not be yet where we hoped we would be by this time, but we are also not stuck where we were last year at this time.

Last year I also said this, another direct quote: “I believe we will get through this—*all* of it—even though it may take longer than any of us would like, and not everything may turn out the way we would prefer.” I stand by that statement. I'm married to a retired historian, and on my bad days, he draws upon his many years of studying and teaching history to remind me that: (a) pandemics always end; and (b) they always last longer than anyone wants them to. I also know that while each of us is differently positioned with regard to the multiple stressors we face, we are resilient, both collectively and individually. Whatever situation you are in today, you will get through it. We will get through it. There are better days ahead, even for those of you whose futures may not be unfolding quite as you would have planned or preferred.

Normally, this is the point in the script where I call upon our division chairs to share all their divisional news. But this year I was thinking that might be awkward, since some of our chairs planned to be here in person but others did not. So at my meeting with the division chairs the other day, I posed a question: “How would you all feel if this year, we just skip the part where the division chairs share their news?”

Well, let's just say that it's been a long time since I saw that much jubilation on the part of our division chairs. Every little box on my zoom screen erupted with applauding hands, pumping fists, and the most enthusiastic smiles I've seen probably since ... February of 2020. Believe me, I got the message—the division chairs don't want to talk. So this year, I'm going to do all the talking (lucky you).

Behavioral Sciences would like to welcome our new NTT faculty member, Josh Uhalt. Josh holds a PhD in Psychology from New Mexico State University and has taught at several colleges. Jaime Cloud is now serving as department head for Psychological Sciences, and Melissa Cannon will be serving as department head of Gerontology. Ethan McMahan continues to serve as division chair.

In Business & Economics, we welcome our incoming division chair, Bojan Ilievski, who was gracious enough to step up to the plate after the sad loss of Hamid Bahari-Kashani, who had been a fixture in the division and at WOU for over thirty years. Thank you, Bojan, and thanks also to John Leadley, who stepped in as interim chair last April under the most challenging of circumstances. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the superhuman work done by Kathy Witwer, who kept the train on the tracks in a turbulent time. Bojan, John, Kathy, and all of the faculty in Business & Economics pushed through their own sadness, dealt with the upheaval, and helped our students deal with this tragic loss, every step of the way. By doing so, they have honored Hamid's memory in the best manner possible.

Our Computer Science Division continues to roll along. Lucas Cordova continues his work on a significant National Science Foundation Grant, “Testing Tutor - An Inquiry-Based

Pedagogy and Supporting Tool to Improve Student Learning of Software Testing Concepts.” Becka Morgan continues as program coordinator for Computer Science and Tad Shannon for Information Science, with Breeann Flesch continuing as division chair.

In Criminal Justice, we are pleased to announce that Miyuki Arimoto has received tenure and promotion to Associate Professor. As many of you know, Miyuki’s work on the healing garden at the Oregon State Penitentiary has been groundbreaking. Criminal Justice would also like to welcome new NTT faculty member James Bents. Prior to joining us here at WOU, James had an illustrious career with the FBI, where he worked to combat violent crime, crimes against children, organized crime, and money laundering. Vivian Djokotoe continues to serve as division chair.

In Creative Arts, we would like to congratulate James Reddan for receiving tenure and promotion to Associate Professor of Music. You saw an example this morning of the outstanding work that James is doing here with our students, and I would especially like to call out the work of *all* our faculty and students who kept the music playing at WOU last year—outdoors, through sun, rain, wind, hot, cold and more. Our musicians are more unstoppable than the postal service. James is also serving as the new department head of Music. Our Art Department continues to be headed by Dan Tankersley, our Dance department by Tim Cowart, and our Theatre department by Scott Grim. David Janowiak continues to serve as division chair.

The Humanities Division is pleased to announce that Rob Troyer has received promotion to Full Professor. Rob continues to do outstanding work in the field of linguistics. Humanities would also like to welcome new NTT faculty members Sylvain Fremaux in French, Becky Patterson in Linguistics, and Chelsea Williams in Communication Studies. Dana Schowalter continues as department head for Communication Studies, Lars Soderlund for English Studies, Patricia Gimenez for Modern Languages, and Ryan Hickerson for Philosophy. Paula Baldwin continues to steer the Humanities ship as division chair.

In Natural Sciences & Mathematics, we have some notable faculty accomplishments. David Szpakowski in Earth Science received a NASA Space Grant, and Gareth Hopkins in Biology received a grant from Oregon Conservation and Recreation. Both Leanne Merrill in Math and Patty Flatt in Chemistry were recognized as Open Educational Resource Champions for Oregon in Spring 2021. Ava Howard is serving as department head for Biology, Patty Flatt for Chemistry, Jeff Templeton for Earth Science, and Matt Ciancetta for Math. Kristin Latham-Scott continues to serve as division chair.

The Social Science Division would like to welcome new NTTs Latham Wood and Joseph Oduro Appiah. The Politics & Public Administration Department would also like to make sure everybody knows about their upcoming new certificate in Public and Nonprofit Management. Isidore Lobnibe is leading the Anthropology program, with Mike McGlade serving as department head for Sustainability, Mark Henkels for Politics & Public Administration, and Maureen Dolan for Sociology. Mary Pettenger continues to serve as Social Science Division Chair.

Let's give a warm welcome to our new instructors, express our gratitude to those faculty who are taking on leadership roles during a challenging time, and give a round of applause to those who received grants, awards, tenure and/or promotion during the past turbulent year. If I omitted something important, please alert your division chairs so I can include share accolades with the rest of the college.

As I believe most of you know, my discipline is English, and my dissertation was in the field of writing pedagogy. In short, I teach writing, and I teach people how to teach writing. One of my areas of specialty is how to break through writer's block. Imagine my surprise, then, when I sat down to write these remarks, and there was nothing there. Instead of writing my dean's address, I would do many other important things, like laundry. Or dishes. Or rearranging my closet. Or alphabetizing the spices in my kitchen cupboard. Or cleaning the cat litter box. Anything but writing. I was starting to feel suspiciously like one of my own students.

So I decided to treat myself as though I *were* one of my own students. I held a writing conference with myself. In the process, I realized I am a pretty bad student. But, using the techniques that I've usually taught to other people, I finally got something down on paper. I don't think a person needs a PhD in composition studies to figure out the cause of my block. In times like these, it is hard to know what to say. So I decided to start by revisiting what I said last year. (Recycled paper alert.)

Last year, I said that I hate it when pessimists turn out to be right. I'll stand by that statement. I also said that the numerous simultaneous crises we face—the pandemic, racial injustice, political polarization, conspiracy theories, wildfires, a university budget crisis—would each have been stressful enough on its own, let alone in tandem. I'll stand by that statement too, and will now add in ice storms and even *more* (and increasingly weird) conspiracy theories.

I also shared three things I knew to be true. First truth: each of you are doing, and have done, valuable and important work. I'll stand by that too. Whatever may happen in the future, each of you should know that your life has *not* been wasted and that your work *is* appreciated, by me as well as by many others.

Second truth: while we all know that uncertainty is one of the most stressful situations for human beings, certainty is actually an illusion. Life never is, never has been, and never will be, certain; there are merely times when it *seems* more certain. This is not one of them. But the clarity we thought we had at past moments—and the clarity we will someday feel we have again—is illusory. As I said last year, anyone who tries to predict the future is writing fiction. I'll stand by that one too, because when this epiphany dawned on me last year, I realized that I—and all of us—already have what it takes to get through uncertain times, because we do it every day. We have been doing it every day of our lives. We just didn't know it. Because even when we thought things were certain, they really were not. That means: *we already know how to do this*.

Third truth: *The status quo is not working*, whether we're talking about health care, economics, politics, the environment, social organization, and our own field of education. I'll

stand by that statement too. In fact, it is *because* the status quo needs to change that it is so important for all of us to continue doing our work, whether that work takes place here or the winds of change blow us elsewhere. These days there is so much misinformation, and we are all struggling with the consequences of poor critical thinking and analytical skills—and I don't just mean in the classroom.

This is disturbing, but perhaps not surprising, because across the United States, from K through 12 and on through college and graduate school, this nation has been systematically defunding and devaluing public education for several decades. It shouldn't be a shock, then, that a significant segment of the population is now woefully under-educated. Challenging as that is, the situation reminds us that what we are doing here now is more important than ever—even though we're still struggling to be adequately funded, supported, championed and appreciated. It's hard to keep going under these circumstances, but perhaps paradoxically, it's *because* of these circumstances that it's vital for us to keep going.

What form will our work take this year? Last Friday, President Kenton laid out the priorities on which we will collectively focus: building our enrollments; becoming more diversified, equitable and inclusive; achieving status as a Hispanic Serving Institution; and improving our collective morale. As your dean, I will be steering the ship as we undertake all these efforts, many of which are already underway.

When it comes to increasing enrollments, we are developing a model for incentivizing work that helps us raise those numbers. I am pleased to see that the model, while still in draft form, envisions a collaborative rather than competitive framework. We'll approach this in a variety of ways: by conducting outreach to our nearby community colleges and high schools, by enhancing our program marketing efforts, and more. I welcome ideas from all of you. My doors, both actual and metaphorical door, are always open.

We'll also be taking a closer look at how we both define and support student success. Last year we began our participation in the American Council of Education's Learner Success Lab, co-directed by Adry Clark and myself, with the support of a combined faculty-staff steering committee and several sub-committees. In the coming weeks we will be consulting with various stakeholder groups on campus as we articulate our definition of what "student success" means, highlight the many things we already do well, and think deeply about what we still need to do.

For a little "sneak peek": we are currently examining how we might better embed career readiness into *every* field of study at the university, including fields that on the surface appear less targeted toward a specific career path. That doesn't mean we are going to morph into a vocational-technical school. (For the record, there is nothing wrong with voc-tech school—that is actually how I started on my own somewhat unconventional career path—but it's not who we are.) What it *does* mean is helping students in every major to think about what attributes they are developing as a result of their educational experience, how they can articulate those attributes, and how they might apply them after graduation, both in the workplace and in other facets of life. It means conceptualizing "career readiness" as something not just as an "add-on" for senior year, but as an ongoing process embedded in the entire college experience, from year one onward. Stay tuned for more exciting news about this project.

We will also be focusing this year on diversity, equity and inclusion, as we search for a cabinet-level director. This dovetails well with the goals of Learner Success Lab, as this effort too will require us to look closely at who our students are, what they need, and what changes we can make to better serve them. This means not just diversifying the personnel at our campus, but working to become a more welcoming, hospitable and inclusive place—a place where every person feels like they belong. We've got some exciting opportunities in this area, starting this week. Tomorrow, Dr. Nicole Stokes of St. Joseph's University will deliver two faculty-focused workshops via Zoom, and the university has scheduled what promises to be a thought-provoking campus-wide presentation by Joseph Green at 2:00 p.m. on Thursday. This week's events will be a good start. Of course, two days is hardly enough. But I do believe these presentations will get us all thinking, reflecting, caring, conversing, and moving in the right direction.

Morale. That's a tough one. So many of us have been, and are still going through, so many challenges. It can be hard to bring our "best selves" to work right now. Some days, we might feel fortunate if we can bring *any* "self" to work at all. There are no easy answers here, but when I think about persevering through tough times, I always hear the voice of my father—even though it's been nearly thirty years since he passed away: "Each day you must wake up and do what you need to do. Whether you feel like it or not, do what needs to be done. Just keep on going." If I were to tell you his life story, you'd realize that for my father, this was no small thing. I benefitted from the wisdom of my elders.

But wisdom can also come from those who are much younger. When my daughter was in second grade, she came home one day, all excited about learning how she can use writing in her everyday life. She grabbed a stack of paper and some marker pens and announced, "I am going to make a list for tomorrow, so I don't forget to do all the exciting things I have planned!" She worked studiously for about a half hour, and then presented me with her very first To-Do List. Item number one: "Wake up." Item number two: "Get out of bed." Some days I go back to the wisdom of six-year-olds—we have to start by waking up and getting out of bed. If you've been able to get that far, you're moving in the right direction.

This reminds me of a quote from the writer E.L. Doctorow, who was speaking of writing when he said, "It's like driving a car at night, in the fog. You can never see further than your own headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way, if you need to." I know that to be true of writing, but it is also true of so much else. "Just keep on going." I would add, just make sure your headlights are on. That means staying clear about our purpose.

As we keep going, I'd like to remind all of us, including myself, that we are all, always, ambassadors—for whatever groups we belong to and whatever causes we take up. We are ambassadors for our disciplines, departments, programs and divisions. Many, perhaps even all, of us, deeply believe that what we study and teach has value beyond monetization (though that also matters), and meaning beyond what can be measured in quantitative terms. We believe our fields of expertise can help to build a better society, and can make us better people. The best way to demonstrate that is to *be those better people ourselves*. Remember that we are ambassadors for our college and university, and for academia in general. If we want to have a society that places greater value—and hence, greater funding—on higher education, then we not only need to

advocate vigorously; we also must exemplify in our own lives what the benefits of higher education can be. We must remember that we are ambassadors for our communities, state and nation. We must always be thinking about what message we send—through our words, of course, because as academics, we love to talk—but also through our actions.

I've been giving thought to what actions I plan to pursue in the coming year. First, during fall term, I hope to resume the Dean's Newsletter that has been on hiatus since about, well, March of 2020. There's a link on the Dean's web page where you can submit your news directly to my office. Several of you shared good news with me over the summer—yes, we had some good news—and that will provide us with a start, but it's not a bad idea to re-send it through that portal just to make sure your story doesn't fall through the cracks. As a reminder, I don't have time to track everybody down, so I depend upon divisions submitting their news. That being said, I do strive for balance, so if something isn't printed right away, please don't take it personally; just remember that this newsletter needs to serve everyone in the college, and be patient. This is an important step toward creating a cohesive sense of what our college is doing, for sharing our accomplishments both internally and externally, and for building a stronger sense of community.

Another project I plan to work on this year is forming a Student Advisory Board to the Dean. Through my interactions with national organizations, I've learned that this type of advisory board is quite common at other institutions. It provides a conduit for deans to hear directly about student concerns, and gives administrators a chance to be more immediately responsive and communicate with students on a regular basis, not only when there are problems. I'm still in the process of determining the details. I do know it's important to stretch beyond the predictable participants and include a range of students with a variety of interests, goals and pursuits. This is something I plan to work on during fall term, so that we can get up and running later in the academic year.

I'm starting with those things, keeping my expectations fairly modest, and we will see where it takes us. I had hoped that by now, we would be out of the fog. We're not. But we're still heading down the right road, with our headlights on, and we can make the whole trip this way if we need to. Just keep going. Do what needs to be done. Each day, wake up and get out of bed.

I will close today by reiterating the promise I made last year: I will continue to do my best on your behalf. I still can't predict what will happen—remember, certainty is an illusion—but I will attempt to do my work with as much integrity and compassion as possible. My goal is to foster an environment in which we can all bring our best selves to work, such as they are at the moment, and do our best work, whatever that may be at the moment.

Last year I closed by saying it is our job to keep the light shining in the darkness. That is still our job. I am here to support all of you as we work to keep that light shining.