

Western Washington University
2008 Faculty and Staff Convocation
September 17, 2008

President Bruce Shepard's Prepared Remarks

Cyndie joins me in offering a warm welcome to you all. We have been simply overwhelmed by the enthusiasm of the welcome we have received. And for those others here today who also are just joining us, we hope you have received the same great welcome. We hope you are as excited as Cyndie and I are to be a part of Western.

Now, I have to report that, wherever we have gone as we are getting to know the state, the weather has been spectacular. And, predictably, we hear those we are meeting observe, "Oh, the weather is always like this."

Hmmm, ... Our friends in Green Bay approached the topic of Bellingham weather somewhat differently. They would say, "You know, it rains a lot out there."

To that I would simply reply, "Yes, but you don't have to shovel it."

We are delighted to be in Bellingham, serving Western Washington University, and to be here with you this morning to start a new academic year. I just love the rhythms of academic life. Always have. I vividly recall that first night before the opening of the term where I, brand new assistant professor, hardly slept. Same last night. Same every opening session in between. The excitement of a new beginning. And, for Cyndie and me, a new beginning in several senses.

That is what I am going to talk about. I am dispensing with the usual formula for such occasions: remembering the highlights of the year past, identifying opportunities and challenges for the year ahead. I will be emphasizing our future together.

I will attempt to be succinct. Cyndie knows, though, that my professorial tendencies run in the opposite direction. So, she came prepared. <point to Cyndie; Cyndie shows purse with large embedded clock>

I want to being by express my sincere appreciation to those who arranged the event:

- John Dlouhy, Mackenzie Boetes and Renee Redekop from Special Events
- Staff of the Viking Union and Sodexo food services
- and Buff Schoenfeld who took the lead in my office

I also wish to welcome Trustees Sharpe and Zoro. They and their colleagues work so hard and with such passion to help make Western ever better. Let's show our appreciation.

We are gathered here together this morning and, in that gathering is my most basic message: We are in this together. Together – that is how we are best able to succeed, to most effectively advance our shared calling. And, that is how we are most likely to have fun along the way.

A big thanks to you all of you, over 900 who adjusted your schedules to be here. In these busy days, I know that is asking a lot.

Now, I said I would be discussing our future. But of course an academic can never look to the future without first looking back.

Western today is very much the result of the rich legacy of leadership from our past colleagues. This morning, we are joined by past acting presidents Al Froderberg, and Larry DeLorme

Their emeriti presidential colleagues who could not attend did send us all their best wishes. As a group, they represent the thousands of our predecessor Western faculty and staff to whom we are indebted for what is their remarkable professional legacy, this great university.

Let us shown them our appreciation.

One president, in particular, I will say more about. While President Morse and Joe are enjoying a well-deserved and long-planned break, Karen has allowed me to make a special announcement.

Leadership is a core value and integral part of what we call the “Western Experience.” This will become even more the case as the Leadership Advantage program further blossoms.

In today's environment, adding such a "margin of excellence" usually requires that generous individuals step forward, people who understand that advancing the common good is a personal responsibility. Today, I mention three couples who have made major contributions to the Leadership Advantage program. They are:

Jack and Jo Ann Bowman
David and Denise Cole
Rick and Sylvia Haggen

They are joined by 105 others who, in celebrating President Morse' success as leader, contributed to the Leadership Advantage fund.

Representative of so many who regularly step forward to support Western's excellence, let us hear first from Jack and JoAnn Bowman.

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Thank you, Jack and JoAnn.

Now, it is my privilege to share with you, today, that as a result of such philanthropic generosity, we are able to create and fully endow a professorship in leadership. It will be the Bowman Family Distinguished Professor of Leadership Studies, a position that will be dedicated to curricular innovation, teaching and scholarship that advances the understanding and application of leadership.

But that is not all. We are also able to endow a leadership institute. Under the direction of the Bowman professor, the institute will be a magnet for exploration and innovation in teaching and conducting scholarship in this important field. I am particularly privileged to announce, for the first time this morning, that this tangible contribution to "engaged excellence" will, hereafter and always, be know as the Karen W. Morse Institute for Leadership.

Let's hear a word from President Emeritus Morse:

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Thank you, Karen.

That is our history: ceaselessly passionate commitment to academic excellence. And, that must be the compass by which we continue to steer.

Let me turn, then, to discussing our future.

And, how we are going to get there.

Perhaps the most important component of how we move forward has already been touched upon. We must move forward together. That's the reason why this convocation is organized as it is. That is why, every week or two when I ask a selection of colleagues to join me for breakfast, there will be people from all parts of the university – those who get here early to those who leave late, those who work inside wearing business attire and those who work outside wearing rain gear.

There is much more to bringing us together and I will touch upon those in a few minutes. But a president's leadership style is also relevant.

So, what is my role in the “how” of getting to even brighter futures? I firmly believe that leadership in complex situations begins by asking questions instead of giving answers. If you want to know who I am as president, there is no more fundamental point – I have questions, you have answers.

Asking questions but not just any questions. They have to be questions that make us uneasy.

Why? American higher education is in a period of transition. We are being required, ever more forcefully, to be precise about our goals, to do so in measurable ways, and to be demonstrably effective in their pursuit. We are expected to be ever more entrepreneurial and efficient while the regulatory straightjackets seem to tighten with each new taskforce or commission report. Our fundamental notions of knowledge production and the relation of knowledge to our societies are expanding by the day and the resources we need to produce and share that knowledge are shrinking by the minute.

We know that a nation's wealth (economic, cultural, social) is best measured by the developed talent of its people. Our nation has progressed because each generation – several times only after major political struggle – has made the sacrifices necessary to assure that the next generation is better educated. Yet there are indications that that trend is slowing if not reversing. And, is it mere coincidence that that is occurring precisely at the time when those we must more

effectively serve – those whose populations are growing most rapidly – have cultures and skin colors different from the traditional norm in American higher education?

These are powerful forces. We will be changed. With foresight, we will lead in changing the society we exist to serve. But, not without also changing ourselves.

Think about the prior to periods of major transitions in American higher education: those associated with the establishment of the land-grant system after the Civil War and those associated with the GI Bill following the second world war. The higher education establishments of the time actively opposed both transformations. Why, because transformations, by definition, change the status quo and, consequently, threaten the guardians of that status quo.

We, everybody in this room, are part of today's higher education establishment. How do we step outside our zones of comfort? One way is to ask questions that make us uneasy. The technique plays to one of our great strengths as a university: we like to consider difficult questions. We simply must maintain our allegiance to those habits as our examinations turn inward.

I have already been asking a lot of questions of a lot of people. Hundreds of people.

The questions will continue. I will be meeting with every department and division on campus. Academic departments as well as the units that comprise all other parts of the university.

It follows that, if one begins with questions, one must be able to listen. I have placed on the web this morning my summary of what I have heard so far. Am I listening? You be the judge.

This we promise: listening, feedback, listening again – will continue so long as I have the privilege of serving you.

What have I been hearing?

One message came through repeatedly – in the written responses to the questions I sent out, in the conversations I have been having across the state: Western is known and valued for its excellence:

- Our excellence is recognized in the quality of the learning that our graduates demonstrate – on the job, in graduate schools, as engaged members of their communities.
- It is directly traced to the caliber of the professionals who are dedicated to engaging our students in meaningful, personal learning experiences, both curricular and co-curricular.
- It is ground not in magazine rankings but in personal experiences and relationships with the people who are Western – faculty and staff, students, alumni.

I learned of our many other strengths but, in the time remaining, I turn to our challenges. Please remember that, in exercises such this, people focus on areas of potential improvement. The result can sound overly critical. So, again, we are an excellent university with strengths across the board: we know it, the state knows it, and we are not afraid, though, to look for opportunities to be even better.

When it came to challenges, one was paramount: to build stronger, more transparent decision-making. Partly, it is about processes and many comments concerned budgeting.

This we promise: shortly we will have a draft approach to budgeting available to critique. With the benefits of your criticisms, we will then put the process in place. It is a process we will never get exactly right. But, we – I mean all of us on campus – will regularly critique and improve it.

“Silos” was the other most frequently mentioned challenge. Among vice presidential areas, among academic colleagues, people feel it is not easy to cross boundaries. This is compounded by an aversion to taking risks. We are a university comprised of such marvelously talented people but, as you have told me, we do not always realize the full potential of such talent because of barriers to collaboration and aversions to risk.

There is much, organizationally and culturally, that we can change to address the challenges we face. Here, let me simply offer an observation that is almost tautologically true: it is impossible to be a leading institution unless we are willing to risk being out in front of the pack.

Listening, and reflecting on what you told me, there are any number of challenges – and opportunities – ahead. Given time constraints, <point to Cyndie> I will

quickly list them now; more detail can be found on the web. Here are matters we need to take on together:

- There are some immediate needs to fill leadership positions. We must do more than fill positions, though. Together, we must find the candidates and the leadership styles that address the aforementioned challenges of transparency and “silos.”
- We need to examine the councils and other arrangements through which groups on campus are brought together, restructuring to improve effective participation, including formal engagement of governance organizations.
- We need to improve our communication internally – that, of course, is a two-way process – and, externally as well. The external part means marketing, again a two-way process that involves listening and that follows from critically examining ourselves first to understand our strengths.
- We need to insure that operational budgeting, capital budgeting, and enrollment management are fully integrated and driven by clear academic planning.
- Our discussions and your creativity and innovation in serving the university’s mission needs to be fully informed by analytical institutional research focused on relevant and pressing priorities.
- We must embrace increasing demands for public accountability in order to assure that the measures we use are central to what we are about. To do so, will only strengthen our case for public support commensurate with our special approach to engaging excellence.
- We need to set objectives for our advancement efforts that are achievable, shaped and understood by that campus, and that force us to stretch.
- The waterfront development project is important for us and for the communities in which we live. We must be effective in our responsibilities as “stewards of place.” While it is now time to narrow and focus our strategies – academic, political, fiscally – we also may need to be thinking bigger.
- While our focus will remain on outstanding, liberal arts based undergraduate education, we need to build upon that foundation as we open up opportunities for expanded graduate education, international education, and education extending beyond our campus.
- We must continue to set high academic standards for our students, for ourselves. We must continually support, expand, and ever more effectively

highlight our research, scholarly, and other creative excellence as a key component of our overall strategy for moving ahead.

- We need to continue our efforts to diversify our campus as the right and also the self-interested thing to do. Many, many universities are competing with us here and we are ahead of many. But, we must continue our leadership. And, our success.

Just a taste of the challenges and opportunities you and others have been helping me understand.

As only several minutes remain, <point to Cyndie> though, I am going to conclude by turning to the question of where it is we will be going, overall.

The answer is very simple. We are going to go in the direction that you, who are the university, decide we should go. That is what leading by listening is about.

What have I heard so far is your preferred direction? In the survey, I specifically asked about your previously stated vision to move from being the premier public comprehensive in the Northwest to becoming the best in the country. I wanted to know how much support there was for this goal.

The support was overwhelming, well over 90% favorable. And, even those who were doubtful offered comment consistent with the thinking of those who were favorable: specifically, that we should not be chasing after magazine rankings but must stick to our core mission. I could not agree more.

We intend, if my listening has been accurate, to achieve national eminence by doing a demonstrably better job of what we, alone in Washington, are already doing so well.

What is that special role? It is not to become Washington's third research university, that I heard clearly. But, strengthening our already leadership position in research and creative activity will be critical to ever more effectively fulfilling what is our actual role.

Here is one way to think of it. Our students get hands on learning opportunities with "Big U" caliber faculty in the classroom and "Big U" caliber professionals in those important parts of learning and maturing that occur outside the classroom. Paradoxically, those are not the kinds of experiences students would get at the "Big U," where hands on learning opportunities with top faculty are rare for

undergraduates. It also is not the education students would get at the typical private, exclusive liberal arts college where the caliber of the faculty, the facilities, the curricular richness, and the student-involving research and other creative projects do not begin to match what is available at Western.

There is our niche, that is what we continually build our claim to eminence upon, and that is how that compass I mentioned at the beginning – attending to academic excellence – will continue to guide us.

Having recently travelled the state, I can report that the value of what we offer is already generally well understood off our campus. The private sector and graduate schools actively seek our graduates because of their special preparation. The state’s future graduates actively seek Western Washington University: for the coming fall quarter, we received nearly 10,000 applications for about 3,500 openings.

We face challenges.

Here is the most obvious. We are, no more, a regional university. Not even close. We are a destination university. But, how do we effectively communicate that evolution? Our ability to do so is critical to our continuing success. Certainly, our special approach does add special value as evidenced by the demand for it and fills a niche unduplicated in our state (or in many other states). *However, it also costs more.* I don’t see how we can long deliver premier “destination U” learning at “regional U” support levels.

Those are challenges I look forward to taking on, working closely with you as we go about them. Not, though, until I am sure I have heard you correctly, until I am sure we are together on this. So, I look forward to listening to you in the months ahead. React to that web report; react to these remarks. Just don’t react by talking only to the colleague down the hall – LET ME KNOW.

There is hard work ahead. Nothing new about that. This, though, I want to also promise. We will keep our senses of humor in tact and always look for opportunities to have some fun along the way.

My favorite bumper sticker – saw it 40 years ago and it has stuck with me – said simply, “This is not a rehearsal.” To me, that meant, most obviously, we are not practicing for something, this is the one life we have to make count as much as

possible. But, it also meant to me that we have to find fun and pleasure in what we are doing, every day.

Whatever the direction you wish to go, from the bottom of our hearts, Cyndie and I thank you for the opportunity to be a part of such a special and exciting enterprise.