Higher Education in Transformation

Prepared Remarks of WWU President Bruce Shepard
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Thank you, John Warner, for that generous introduction and for your continuing service to Western, to this state, and to Rotary.

I'm a new person on the block, very happy to be serving you. I've watched the state of Washington for over thirty years from Oregon – and more recently from Wisconsin – and I've been impressed with the commitment you have made to the state's future through consistent investment in higher education.

I will return to that subject in conclusion. I was asked to talk about Western Washington University, certainly, but in the context of broader forces transforming American society.

The societal tectonics are well known:

- Certainly, the globe is shrinking and flattening, just one consequence of plummeting information and communication costs.
- The diversity of cultures, races, and ethnicities has always been there. Today, though, we understand that diversity constitutes the building blocks from which our shared brighter futures will be constructed.
- Pressures for the public sector to be ever more efficient and accountable only grow.
- We strive to ever more emphasize an entrepreneurial culture.
- Even as competition abounds, we seek success through strategic partnerships and collaborations.
- The dizzying pace of technological advancement creates opportunities earlier generations could not even dream of. And, challenges – ethical, organizational, social – that our inherited culture and norms are struggling to keep abreast of.
- Climate change and sustainability increasingly define our options and guide our choices.

The list could go on. But, these are a start. What do they mean for Western?

A first principle is that those experiencing transformations, rather than being in the lead, are too often pushed along. Think the health care industry, think print journalism, think the automotive industry.

Think American higher education. Consider the two previous periods of major transformation in American higher education: those following passage of the Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862 and the opening up of public higher education when the GI Bill was passed following the Second World War.

Today, we in higher education look back on these transforming events with self-congratulatory pride. We forget that the higher education establishments of the time felt threatened by these pieces of legislation and opposed both.

How, then, do we lead transformations instead of being propelled along by them? We have to take ourselves outside our zones of comfort -- before we are pushed outside the zone.

The best way to do so is to continually ask questions that make people squirm. That is part of my role as a university president. That is part of your role as leaders and citizens. At the conclusion of my remarks, I will ask you to take me outside my comfort zone.

Where is Western when it comes to the transformations under way?

Over several decades, Western has evolved from being a respectable regional university to being a destination university, the Pacific Northwest's premier public comprehensive university, with nearly 10,000 admissions applicants competing for 2,700 openings.

Our aspirations, though, are to do much more, to be the best university of our type in the nation. Will we get there? That, I don't think, is a particularly useful question. Will pursuit of that aspiration positively transform us? That's the key question and the answer is a confident, "Yes."

How will we transform? Let's reflect back on the implications of those forces I earlier listed. There are changes easily embraced, including the increasing relevance of higher education to challenges of the future. As a society, we know that our nation's wealth (economic, cultural, social) is best measured by the developed talent of our 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 this is occurring precisely at the time when those we must more effectively serve more often have cultures and skin colors different from the traditional norm in American higher education?

Here, universities must step up. Western is stepping up. To date, too much of what universities have done to raise aspirations, mentor, and build access to higher education has been boutique efforts serving handfuls of students, too often competing among ourselves simply to cherry pick those likely to go to college anyway.

We need large size efforts that reach further back in elementary school, targeting every student. I am pleased to report that Western has such a program under development and that in our legislature, yesterday, the House completed action on legislation designating Western as the pilot for the state.

In this program, we partner with many other institutions: technical colleges, community colleges, a tribal college, K-12, and even universities in other regions of the country. And here is illustrated another principle of the transformed university: in all we do, we look for opportunities to compound our effectiveness and improve our efficiency through strategic partnerships.

Even as students rightly expect higher and higher quality and more complete educational experiences, we are striving to control costs and improve returns on

investment. And our business is transformed as we are driven by strategic focus upon retention, graduation, learning rather than teaching, and outcomes rather than inputs. Our dashboard instruments give our trustees a quick real-time overview in the aggregate while we use that same dashboard to drill down to the level of the individual course in trying to figure out how to stretch diminishing dollars ever further.

Over the last 15 years, instructional costs at Western have risen an average of 1.5% above the CPI (Consumer Price Index). We are a talent-based enterprise; the costs of talent always rise faster than do the prices of goods, and so this alignment with the CPI is really remarkable. I imagine my friend and Western Trustee Howard Lincoln who is also in a talent-based industry would like to see the operating budget for the Mariners so closely track the CPI.

Our university is increasingly entrepreneurial. That does unavoidably mean placing a priority on the areas where revenues generated will cover costs incurred. And, if we are to be effectively more entrepreneurial, we public universities need a political environment emphasizing accountability, most assuredly, but focusing that concern upon the ends and not the means.

As to the new technologies, they do allow us to reach audiences traditionally not well served by American higher education, reaching people where they are in their lives, in their careers, and in the state. The idea, though, that these new technologies can significantly lower costs of higher education is a Chimera too often chased and never caught.

The basic fact is that we do not teach history or biology or philosophy, we teach people. *Higher* education is not a mechanical transfer of information; it is a fire inspirationally ignited through human interaction. People teach people. As far as I can glimpse into the future, technologies will greatly extend the effectiveness by which mentors and learners work together, but the basic dependence on highly talented faculty will remain. And, hence, our basic cost structure persists.

In our research and our curricula, Western of today is at the forefront of those transforming societal forces I mentioned earlier, providing ample opportunities for our nearly 14,000 students to learn in close collaboration with “Big U” caliber faculty.

You expect Western to be a leader in monitoring lakes, rivers, streams, wetlands and glaciers and studying earthquake threats, declining bird populations and the health of Puget Sound ecosystems. Do you know that faculty and students in our neurosciences program are gleaning insights into diseases of the brain such as schizophrenia? Or that those in our Advanced Materials Science & Engineering Center are supporting private sector innovation through cutting edge research; for example, helping manufacturers develop low-wake ferries and light weight municipal buses.

Other Western researchers, again engaging undergraduates, analyze the economy, cross-border trade and the effects of NAFTA on Washington businesses.

Western faculty research reaches across the region, state and world in its benefits and applications. To name just a few, we are studying global warming in the arctic, and researching a compound that might aid in the fight against liver cancer.

Want your ethics instruction from the best Philosophy Department in the nation at a non-doctoral university? A recent highly regarded national assessment would say, "come to Western."

As the world continues to wrestle with greenhouse-gas emissions and a staggering dependence on oil, Western is now building a car of the future for the Progressive Automotive X-Prize, a $10 million worldwide contest to build a car that gets 100 miles per gallon. Western's student team, along with Cornell, is one of only two university teams in the world competing in the event.

That was a small sampling of many great things. But how does Western move from best in the Northwest to best in the nation? One part of the puzzle is obvious to everybody on our campus. In a rapidly changing world, we will not get there by simply continuing what, to this point, has proved to be a winning game. We must transform.

Consider one example: Western's Huxley College of the Environment – at 40 years - is one of the oldest environmental colleges in the nation. Forty years ago, meaningfully marrying environmental policy and environmental science was revolutionary. Those were two distinct and mutually distrusting cultures.

Today, other universities are now going about it. At Western, do we not simply pat ourselves on the back for having been there 40 years earlier and then continue business as usual? No, Huxley is asking itself how it must fundamentally change, what it needs to be doing today that, 40 years from now, other universities will want to adopt.

Those are the kinds of questions we are asking at Western, we have some answers I am very excited about. You will be hearing ever more and ever more positive news about your premier public comprehensive university as we push forward.

Last Friday, that is where I ended an initial draft of my remarks.

Not today, though, for I come to you this afternoon having spent the earlier part of the week in Olympia.

Good people in Olympia are struggling with difficult choices. Now, I am one who never felt it got higher education anywhere to whine about problems, budget or otherwise. Instead, we must talk, as I have today, about our capacities to be part of the solution and not part of the problem.

But, none of us in higher education have ever seen what we now believe will be proposed by the legislature at the end of this week or the beginning of next week.

It is the view in Olympia – and I share it – that our state really has not yet grasped the magnitude of what is happening. I conclude by attempting to help with that grasping.

It took decades to build Western from a regional to a premier destination university. But, universities cannot just be temporarily mothballed and then, later, started back up. Consider this history: In the early 80's, Washington experienced, by far, the largest cuts to higher education before or since: 13%. Tuition was raised 16%. How long did it take before higher education in Washington recovered, before student enrollments returned to the earlier, pre-cut levels? Almost a decade and a half.

We are expecting to hear that higher education's budget will be cut by twice the size of that historically unprecedented earlier number. ACTUALLY, MORE THAN TWICE IF DEVELOPMENTS THIS MORNING STICK! And *without* the magnitude of that 16% tuition offset earlier relied upon.

Have no doubt, that requires cutting muscle and bone, not trimming fat. This is a state with a public system of higher education that, in independent national studies, always comes out as at the top in degree production and cost efficiency. And, quality.

As requested, I have talked about the potential for transformation and for transforming. In the next biennium, dismantling looks to be the theme.

While there are several other states talking about cuts nearly as dramatic as those we are expecting will be proposed, these are not states in whose neighborhoods we would want to live. They are not the global challenge states we think of as our peers. New York, Texas, California are not planning to cut back their higher education systems nearly as sharply as we expect to soon hear is necessary in Washington.

California: 10% cut with 9% tuition backfill; Washington: 25% to 30% cut with 7% tuition backfill.

As the economy turns around, who will be positioned to compete globally? And, who will not?

You, the leaders in our state, … you, who have insisted upon sustained investment in brighter futures, … you who get the link between higher education and our capacity to afford high quality of life and commitment to social justice, need to be heard in Olympia.

I now look forward to your questions. Please do move me outside my comfort zone.