

Convocation

August 31, 2017

Remarks delivered by Provost Marten denBoer

It is my honor to welcome you to DePaul's 120th academic year. Thank you for joining us for our 30th Academic Convocation.

I would like to recognize the deans of our 10 colleges and schools here on stage. Our deans nurture the intellectual life of their colleges. They represent you, our faculty and our staff, in support of academic programs and student learning. I thank them for their ongoing work and dedication. They are truly helping to fulfill our Vincentian heritage of support for the underserved.

This is a pivotal year for DePaul. We have a great new president, Dr. Gabriel Esteban, and a new chair of the Board of Trustees, Jim Ryan. And as Vision 2018 comes to an end, we are about to develop a new strategic plan. As we do, it is important to look at where we are now and consider how the landscape for higher education has changed.

At first glance, it might seem we are in pretty good shape. A few numbers:

- Across our 10 colleges and schools, we offer more than 300 programs and annually graduate over 6,500 students.

And those students are pleased:

- More than 90 percent got jobs or continued their education within six months of graduation.
- Based on our most recent student satisfaction survey, more than 80 percent of undergraduates:
 - found our faculty effective, knowledgeable and available
 - are satisfied with the quality of instruction they received
 - judged their courses intellectually stimulating.

These numbers show we're working together to provide students with a high-quality education. Congratulations to the faculty and staff here today who mentored these students and led them to success!

The Higher Learning Commission, our regional accreditor, also validated your good work.

As you know, they've fully reaccredited us. We met all the components of all the criteria. The reviewers said, and I quote: "DePaul University is a dynamic higher education institution. The review team noted a number of excellent practices and processes and a sustaining sense of mission which will help support DePaul as it manages the impending internal transitions in leadership and current external pressures in higher education."

The reviewers did ask about our assessment of student learning. We'll be submitting an interim report on our assessment activities, particularly on the general education program.

But the reaccreditation findings are largely very positive, and I'd like to thank Associate Provost Caryn Chaden in particular, and all of you, for your dedication to our mission and to our students that made this success possible.

However, despite all this good news, there's no reason to be complacent about our future: on the contrary, there are external forces that give reason for concern, even alarm. We are threatened by cost, finances, and demographics.

First, consider cost.

That student survey I just mentioned also showed that less than half our undergraduates agreed that their degree is worth its cost. This is a danger; our costs are high compared to our state-subsidized competitors. We are pricing ourselves out of our market. The result is that we must lower our "sticker price" for virtually all our students.

That has a direct impact on our finances, another reason for concern about our future.

Until recently, our net revenue increased every year by about 5 percent, while our costs increased by much less. But now, our revenue is essentially flat while costs continue to rise.

And there's demographics: we are heavily dependent on students recruited from the Midwest. That population is declining; there'll be many fewer high school graduates in our area 20 years from now.

Let's consider our response to these concerns.

Demographics is what it is: the number of high school students is a pretty easy and accurate prediction; not much we can do about that. Not only is the number of high school students in our area declining; the number of those students whose families can afford a private college education is declining even faster.

We're becoming less affordable for the very students it's our mission to serve. How can we continue to offer a quality education to the disadvantaged, the students we are dedicated to serving, when fewer and fewer of them can afford us?

In fact we can do a lot about the perception of cost and value. That's where all of us come in.

You know, in the past several years we, meaning you, have done outstanding work on student success. Over 85 percent of our entering freshmen now stay for their second year. Over 60% of our entering freshmen graduate in four years; after six years, over 75% have. Those are great numbers given the profile of our entering students. Congratulations to you! And most of our students find jobs related to their academic programs soon after graduating.

Yet, given the external pressures, we must try to do even better. Every student who leaves us without graduating is an opportunity to learn how to serve students better. Every student who does not find a satisfying career is an opportunity for us to adjust our programs to meet changing career requirements.

That's why one of the major focal points of the next DePaul strategic plan must be to strengthen and enhance the student experience, in the classroom and beyond, from the moment students matriculate to when they walk across the commencement stage – and beyond.

Another factor affecting student success is related to the tensions surrounding speech and race – also affected by externalities I need hardly mention. Last year's action plan on speech and race has made great progress, identifying areas for improvement and also making changes to support all our students. New centers for African-American, Latinx, and LGBTQ students are opening. But, while maintaining our commitment to free speech, we must ensure that our marginalized students are welcomed, protected, and supported to succeed in their academic work.

Now let's take a closer look at finances.

As I just said, until a few years ago we were in the happy situation of having net revenue that was constantly growing – at rates well above inflation. That was pretty great: it made it possible to fund new programs and new initiatives from the increased revenue, and not by having to give up something else.

Sadly, that is no longer our situation.

In the past few years, revenue has been essentially flat. There is no new money pouring in for new programs. But we must have new initiatives to remain current and competitive as a university. The only way to fund those new initiatives is to reallocate resources.

That's what we've been doing: You've all experienced funding cuts. Faculty lines that become vacant are not automatically re-filled; rather, they are gathered centrally and often reallocated to areas of greater need. Colleges and schools have had to cut their budgets and faculty and have had to find ways to serve students more economically.

Looking ahead, do the math: with the demographic and affordability factors just mentioned, revenue is likely to remain flat into the future. But our costs, including inflation, modest salary increases, and utilities, will continue to increase. The combination of flat revenue and increasing costs isn't a viable fiscal model.

We must recognize that, given what's going on externally, we're in a new era of fiscal constraint. And it's in this new environment that we must embark on a new strategic planning process.

Vision 2018, our current plan, will run its course. We must develop a new strategic plan that looks to the future, to 2024 and beyond, and provides for growth, but also prioritizes what we currently do and allows us to make difficult decisions.

President Esteban will have more to say about that in a moment and in more detail in a few weeks at the State of the University meeting.

I trust the innovative spirit in all DePaul's faculty and staff will continue as we embark on this challenging task in this new year with new possibilities.

As faculty, you create knowledge. You instill knowledge in others. I ask you to continue to develop ideas that serve the needs of our students. Together, we can make them happen.

Best wishes for a rewarding academic year. Thank you again for all you do.