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Thank you to all of you for your presence here today as we celebrate the start of Duquesne University’s 137th academic year with our annual Convocation. Thank you for your support last year, and in anticipation, for your support through the coming year.

As we approach the end of 2015, we near the close of our current Strategic Plan, the second five-year plan of this Administration. It has been a powerful and successful engine of change and progress for all of us.

How can I say this with such confidence? Shortly after the Plan was vetted by the University community and approved by the Board of Directors, the Cabinet prepared an Implementation Document. It detailed the concrete steps we felt were necessary to achieve the goals of the Plan. During the 2012-13 Academic Year, about halfway through the Plan, the Cabinet assessed the Implementation Document. We did our best to determine from evidence across the University where a practical aim was already met, in progress toward being met, unmet, or in need of a change in light of new realities or understandings. At that time, we reached the conclusion that a good part of the Strategic Plan had already been achieved, thanks to efforts in every part of the University.

We repeated this exercise last spring. Of significance was the presence of three new Vice Presidents in the process. We reached an even greater reassurance that through our University-wide Implementation measures, the Strategic Plan has been largely fulfilled.

The caveat that was clear to us at the time and remains true today is that some of our Strategic Plan can never be finished once and for all. This is because some of our goals are clearly matters of degree; they can always be done better or more fully. Other goals are the perennial work of who we are as a Spiritan University; these can never be finally completed.

I can also report on another practical application of the Strategic Plan. Each year there are millions of dollars of proposals for new University spending generated from across the University and a far smaller pool of dollars available to be spent. Even after Department Chairs, Directors, and Deans have winnowed their lists to produce their highest priorities, it is left to the Vice Presidents and me to make the final approvals for inclusion in the budget. The guide for this last step is the Strategic Plan. This common agreement of ours therefore directs our
practical decisions about new investments. For example, our Plan calls for improvements in our housing facilities and in those for commuters. So we have invested heavily in these areas over the last several years. It also calls for improvements in our graduate programs. So stipends have been increased, health insurance added and endowments created for our Ph.D. students.

Without detailing the long list of achievements in each of our goals, let me simply say that because of our collective efforts to chart a future for ourselves with this Strategic Plan and our shared attention to its demands at critical moments, we are far better off today with respect to the three main areas the Plan addresses. We have further emphasized our Spiritan identity and mission. We have enhanced the quality of our student experience. We have further developed

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Thank you for the role that each one of you has played in bringing us to this positive result.

We now must begin the process of creating a new Strategic Plan.

In doing so, we must fully consider the forces at work around us—challenges that must be faced head-on in the foreseeable future.

The population of college-age students is declining. Fewer students are seeking law school and graduate education. We compete with other schools for a shrinking pool of students. These demographics are magnified by economic conditions which cause many to question the cost and value of higher education, and by calls for more government regulation and scrutiny in the name of accountability.
These realities cannot be ignored. They have real, measurable impacts on our revenue and expenses. Over the past few years, we have mitigated the negative effects through prudent budgeting, judicious management and shared restraint. We will surely continue to do so, and we must be prepared to make more difficult decisions as circumstances require.

Like our previous plans, I suggest that our new blueprint be composed to span another five-year period. This length of time is long enough to avoid condemning the whole University community to constant planning—some universities, for example, have three-year plans. Yet it is short enough to allow us to envision some of the future that surely lies before us—unlike those universities who have chosen ten-year horizons.

The process should be inclusive and deliberative, even though this will slow the pace of progress toward a conclusion considerably. We should not hurry through this. Little is to be lost if there is a hiatus of a year or more between the end of the current Plan and the start of the next one. There was such a hiatus between our first Strategic Plan that ended in 2008 and the second that began in 2010. In my estimation, the second Plan was better because of that reflective interval. But much can be lost if we rush and do not perform this process well. Then we risk a bad outcome and a poor sense of common direction. Moving the process too quickly may also fail to generate a true consensus by eliminating or silencing some voices.

Let me tell you a brief story to illustrate the latter point. There was no Strategic Plan when I became President in 2001. At my first meeting with the Board, I convinced them that we needed such a Plan, that it is part of the life of a contemporary university. At subsequent meetings, I would update the Board on the progress of campus discussions and the themes that were emerging that would likely be brought to them when a nearly final document emerged from the process for their approval.

A Board member, who was clearly exasperated with the length of this process and perhaps with the new President leading it, spoke up at a meeting and said, “Are you telling the Board that you could not write a credible Strategic Plan for this University all by yourself in forty-five minutes?” Here was my reply, one I would still give today: “Yes, I believe I could. But the result of that process would be my Strategic Plan not the University’s Strategic Plan.”

This, I believe, has to be the viewpoint all of us employ as we enter this process. Each of us could indeed write our own credible plan, but it would only be our own. We must engage one another to build a plan for the whole of the University. And we must all understand at the outset that even our most favored ideas—as individuals and in our own units—may not survive for inclusion at the end of the process. That conclusion will include not only a condensation of our very best ideas but also approval by the Board of Directors and the Spiritan Corporation.

The process should start with a wide gathering of ideas and then bring them down to something challenging but internally coherent. I will be expecting the Provost and the Deans, with the Faculty Senate, to take the lead in organizing faculty input. The Vice Presidents of Mission and Identity and for Student Life will play a similar role, leading planning among their administrative staff and among student leaders. There
will also be periodic town hall meetings open to input from all. The nature of these conversations in the three Vice Presidential areas and in the open meetings will be detailed through this semester.

The last two Strategic Plans have not had explicit sections expressing goals for our Advancement area or for Management and Business. I leave it as an open question at this point whether they should be included in the next Plan. Many other universities do so, but our past Plans have benefitted from a simplicity of focus. The three elements we have included display the heart of who we are: bringing students into an educational encounter with faculty in a mission-driven environment. But whether the final decision is to include goals from these areas explicitly in the Plan or not, I do want them to conduct planning processes as if they were to be included. These areas are too important to the University’s overall success to leave them out of our strategic planning process altogether.

Let me offer my own views on what I believe should be re-emphasized in some form from the current Strategic Plan into the next one. This is where I see, at this time, the greatest continuity from the near past to the near future.

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**Stress on our mission must be even stronger going forward,** with greater emphasis on links to Spiritan works worldwide. The self-referential dimension of our mission needs more attention. We should articulate how we intend to show our mission in action to our students and to the world around us in the ways that we treat one another. Peace and justice will continue to be central themes for us but respect for the integrity of creation must be further underscored as threats to our natural environment become clearer and more substantial.

Our retention and graduation rates must get better and better. The student body, indeed our whole community, must become more diverse. Housing on campus will remain a priority with attention turned next to our oldest residence hall, Assumption. This is a competitive necessity—as is continued beautification of campus. And our sports teams must continue to spread our reputation as contenders for leadership in both of our athletic conferences.

Faculty scholarship should continue to grow in both quantity and quality. The emphasis on Africa should continue and deepen, with more support for research and exchanges of faculty. Our relationship with the Spiritan University College in Ghana should expand, including assisting them with the development of their academic offerings and organizing more short-term educational visits there by our students. We can also more fully develop our relationship with the Spiritan International School of Theology in Nigeria. Our own
academic facilities should be constantly upgraded, with the School of Business facilities in Rockwell as our immediate focus. And more attention must be paid to interdisciplinary opportunities. Our new Biomedical Engineering Program and our new theater offer great promise in this respect.

These are my thoughts about elements of continuity from this Plan to the next. You will have your own. The planning process we embark upon will surely help to shape our thoughts here.

**Let me conclude with some new considerations** that I believe should also be incorporated into the next Strategic Plan in some fashion. I have already mentioned diversity; it is included in our current Plan and we have made progress here. But we are at a distinct disadvantage in making further advances in this arena due to the lack of diversity in our region. Pittsburgh, despite its remarkable history of diversity a century ago, is now the least diverse of the top metro areas in the nation. Combine this fact with the reality that most universities draw the bulk of their students from within a few hundred mile radius of their campuses and you see the challenge we face. Every accrediting body’s report in every discipline at Duquesne since I have been President has pointed to our lack of diversity as a problem we must solve. So we must learn to be more creative.

We have taken some steps recently that may help in the long run. We have reorganized the use of our large endowment for African American students to make it more effective in recruiting new students. We have also added a new endowment to help junior and senior African Americans in good academic standing but who face unanticipated financial problems. It is hoped this new money will lead to better retention and graduation rates for them. We have established two new focused endowments to fund scholarships, one for Hispanic students and one for Asian American students. We have even created an endowment for
We can all be proud of the fact that our mission is such a driving force on our campus, enlivening so much of what we do and aspire to do.

But two factors are at work that will affect the future on this score in unknown ways. First, vocations to the Spiritan Congregation in North America and in Europe are in serious decline. Fortunately, our status as the only comprehensive Spiritan university in the world has allowed us to attract a large number of Spiritans from Africa where the Congregation is growing. We must continue to be a welcoming and supportive place for them as they will constitute our Spiritan presence in years to come.

At the same time, young Americans are alienated from organized religion as never before. Even many of those who arrive here neutral on this
topic are unchurched, given to describing themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” The general culture that surrounds them prizes immediate satisfaction over the cultivation of traditional virtue. Unsettling and highly publicized problems within the Catholic Church as well as the disaffection of so many women from the Church hierarchy create special challenges for keeping the Spiritan mission and identity vital on campus. On our own, we cannot change American culture nor easily affect the direction of the Church. But my hope is that the plan will suggest ways to more effectively communicate our values and show them in action to our students.

Another issue that may be appropriate for our new Strategic Plan is the nature of our Gumberg library. What do we expect of a library in the age of handheld digital access to so many resources that once required a physical trip to a library and often the direct assistance of a librarian? With the exception of a few special collections, we have all but ceased adding books to our library. Instead, the library budget is now consumed with the costs of subscriptions to on-line material.

Our students have already made a major transition in the way they think of and use our library. For them, it is not a quiet place for individual research and study. Instead, it is a common space for group projects. Silence is not a priority. Before mid-semester and final exams, the library also becomes a massive study hall. Then the chief concerns are lighting, availability of comfortable furniture and access to electrical outlets for charging tablets and smart phones.

All universities are grappling with this question of library function. The philanthropic community,
which could be counted on in the past to support renovation and construction of libraries, is reluctant to help today because no clear national consensus about the future library has emerged. In our case, this challenge is especially serious because of the age and physical layout of our building. We will have to make some choices soon about the future direction of the Gumberg Library. Our new Strategic Plan could help point the way.

As you know, the University is embarking on a more focused approach to e-learning. This is not a new medium for us. We have excellent on-line programs that are national leaders in their fields. But overall, our involvement in this area has been a patchwork of programs here and there with little University-wide integration. To move to the next level of national excellence, coordination of all academic programs has been moved into the Provost’s office. This is a very important structural achievement.

The challenge ahead now is substantive: What shall we contribute in the world of e-learning? Let me offer my views on the future here. There are many opportunities for us to do innovative things in this arena, things that will capture the best of who we are in a relatively new medium. But we must not undermine our main achievement, our historic brand, so to speak. This is face to face, highly personalized education for the traditional-aged undergraduate. Students here on campus for their undergraduate years should remain largely in the classroom. E-learning for them should be supplemental to their relationship with faculty members in the classroom. It should be an additional tool to be used like Blackboard.

We will no doubt evolve important corners of e-learning even for these traditionally aged undergrads. I hope, for example, that we will develop on-line courses for undergrads who are at home for the summer. This will be particularly useful for those who would otherwise take courses at local community colleges and transfer those credits back to us. This will give us greater control of the quality of course content. E-learning for undergrads studying abroad can expand the number of our students who could profit from a semester in Rome or Dublin but who now cannot do so because a course they need is offered only here on campus. There are already many highly sophisticated clinical courses on-line that simulate interactions with patients, a great benefit in extending exposure to different kinds of patients in varying settings and situations. These courses are very useful for our health sciences undergraduates and we can lead in developing more of them.

But our main audience for e-learning should be adult learners who know how to learn independently, primarily graduate and non-traditional students. We should develop fully on-line or hybrid programs for them. Even here, and especially here, care must be taken to ensure that the subject matter of the course or program is appropriate for e-learning. Most importantly, we should distinguish our programs from the many others available to adult learners. This will mean consideration of competitive factors of expense and revenue, as well as our ability to take a leadership role in the on-line market. And our own Duquesne commitments will mean emphases on ethics and other mission-driven considerations and inclusion of advising and support services. The next Strategic Plan can be of immense help in sorting through the important issues at stake here.
I offer a final thought and a prayer.

As we begin this new process of strategic reflection on our times and what it will require of us, it is useful to remember that we have something rare among working men and women. It is something we inherited and must always protect and enhance. We have a community driven by a deep sense of purpose in all that we do. We have this gift by virtue of the continued grace and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Giver of Life. I pray that your work and mine will be filled this year with new life. And I ask that our planning process will lead to even greater accomplishments for Duquesne University of the Holy Spirit and for the students we are privileged to serve.

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