ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF OUR STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCE

DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY
CONVOCATION 2012
In the fall of 2011, President Charles Dougherty gave the first in a three-year series of Convocation Addresses based on the core priorities of the University’s strategic plan. Last year’s address focused on the many ways in which the Duquesne community works to emphasize our Spiritan identity and mission. In this year’s address, President Dougherty reflects on how Duquesne is enhancing the quality of the student experience by pursuing these strategic objectives:

- Freshman admissions will continue to become more selective. The percentage of legacy freshmen will increase.
- The student body will become more diverse and support for human diversity will become a commitment of all students.
- The quality of the student experience will promote lifelong bonding to the University and continued engagement of alumni.
- The graduate student experience will be assessed and improved.
- There will be improved assessment of all student outcomes and those assessments will be used for systematic enhancements.
- Intentional collaborations between Student Life and Academic Affairs will be increased.
- Housing facilities will be improved, as well as facilities for commuter students.
- Duquesne athletes will perform at the top of their conferences in sports and in academic performance.
- The development of campus will continue with emphasis on functionality, beauty, and sustainability.
We serve God by serving students. This is a phrase we repeat to ourselves as a reminder of the overarching goal of Duquesne University and all of our individual efforts. It is the ultimate context for what we do together. Others serve God in varieties of ministries—in health care, in social services, and in multiple ways in their daily lives.

But we serve God through an educational institution dedicated to the Holy Spirit. It is important to insist that it is in our life together as a community that we fulfill this mission. Many of us see few students on a daily basis. Some of us never directly serve any students in the jobs we perform. But that is an irrelevance to our overall charge. It is not you or I who serve students; it is we who do so. So it is not only those of us who have direct daily contact with students who serve them. It is every one of us in this University, regardless of our specific tasks. All our work is in service to students.

We do so immediately, of course, because we care for students. But this is true of virtually all universities. Students and their parents are tuition-paying customers. Customer care is the only sensible strategy for success in a service economy. To this extent, we are like every other university. But our motivation for service is far deeper. The goal for us is not service to students in the first place. Rather it is service to students as a means of serving God. This is also an important reminder in dealing with the occasional student we do not intuitively care for. Service is not directly about that student; it is about God through that student.
But the link between serving God and serving students is a close one. It lies, I believe, in our tradition’s foundational assumption that each human being is endowed with human dignity by God. The root of all our mutual obligations lies in respect for that dignity. This insight gives life to the service of God in ministry, health care and social service. Similarly, it animates our understanding of that goal of education. We are serving—educating—students out of respect for their God-given dignity. As such, we are serving God by serving them.

Put in other words closer to our specific tradition, each of our students’ dignity is the spark of the Holy Spirit within them. Our service to God is reverence to the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of every one of our students. That presence is the Spirit Who Gives Life. Duquesne University of the Holy Spirit—each of us—enriches that life through education and helps to bring it to its fullest potential in each of our students.

This allows us to understand why service to students can take expressions that are not in the immediate interests of our students. As we are serving their God-given dignity, the Holy Spirit within them, our concern is for their long-term best interest, their full growth as persons with dignity. That interest lies in conformity with our honest assessment of what God intends for them. In the most general of terms, the goal is respect for human dignity. It expresses itself through our dedication to each of our students’ growing self-respect and respect for others.

Thus high academic standards serve our students because such standards respect their dignity and the evolution of their own sense of self-respect. In simple terms, they challenge them to grow as persons. We are committed to such high standards even when they are difficult for some to attain; even when some cannot attain them with their best efforts and with the extra help we provide. Those students, we must conclude, are best served in other environments. We do and we should help them find those alternatives environments in which they can thrive.

Similarly, we establish and enforce rules on campus and in our living learning centers to create and maintain an environment of mutual respect and the growth of self-respect. Some students, we know, will face disciplinary action because of these rules and expectations. In extreme cases, these standards will mean that some students will be forced to leave us. In short, service to God by serving students does not—cannot—mean that every student gets everything he or she wants. A goal of everything for everyone without norms—were it even possible of realization—would undermine human dignity. Just as we together create an environment of service for them, so students together must respect the rules and structures that allow the Spirit to Give Life to our campus in all our endeavors.

It must be emphasized that this understanding of our mission applies to all students. Those with different views of God are endowed with the same God-given dignity. Those who have no religious beliefs and those who are belligerent toward religion in general or to our religious tradition in particular also have the same life of the Spirit. They are also to be served. But once again, this does not mean meeting all their immediate interests. Establishment of a University sponsored club to promote atheism, for example, may be an interest of some students here and now but plainly does not serve God by serving students overall and in the long run.
“WE ARE SERVING—EDUCATING—STUDENTS OUT OF RESPECT FOR THEIR GOD-GIVEN DIGNITY.”
Our service to students is primarily educational and all of us, regardless of our specific roles on campus, are educators. This is most clear in the case of the faculty. Their educational relationship to students is straightforward and their service to them obvious. But it is also true throughout all of our student services areas—in the living learning centers, throughout our many student organizations, in athletic and recreational settings, in counseling and health services, and in student life generally.

If these settings seem less obviously educational than the classroom, consider the broadest meaning of education. It is, in its most fundamental sense, an experience or set of experiences from which one draws a benefit for the future. In the classroom, that benefit can be largely academic, as in knowledge of biochemistry or medieval philosophy. Or, it can be a combination of the academic and the applied as in pharmacy or physical therapy.

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Learning in the Student Life area tends to be more wholly practical, but also lifelong and often of wider application. An important bit of learning in a residence hall, for example, might be the skill of coping with a difficult roommate. This is a bit of practical learning with wide application in life, inside and outside a career. In a student organization, the same may be said of the development of leadership skills. In an athletic or recreational setting, practical lessons related to teamwork and team building can be applied everywhere. What students learn through counseling, drug and alcohol awareness,
and health services is plainly of lifelong value. Throughout campus, there is a large and important education that happens in meeting and befriending people of differing and diverse backgrounds.

We try to construct Duquesne’s student life so that such education comes in the most pleasant and rewarding fashion, beginning with freshmen move-in and our very first warm welcomes. It extends through the most important adjustments in freshman development, in the structure of our Greek system, in our support for students with disabilities. It is part of our assistance with tutoring and with career decisions and job searches, in the organization of residence life and dining services, in recreation and athletics. We try to structure and staff all our support systems from campus ministry, commuter affairs, health services, career services, to parking and policing to be as friendly and affirming as possible. But just as our commitment to high academic standards may be a frustration for some, so can the rules that must structure students’ social life. Not all behavior is tolerable in a community with our values. Not everything is, in that most insightful word that our students have coined, “Duquesnable.” Moreover, some of life’s best lessons are derived from mistakes and corrections. Our resident directors and advisors, and the Office of Student Conduct know this truth well. More importantly, so do many of our students and alumni who have benefitted immeasurably from timely and caring interventions.
We owe all of our Student Life professionals our sincerest gratitude for sustaining on a daily basis an environment of practical education based on respect for human dignity and the enhancement of our students’ own self-respect. They make multiple difficult choices on a regular basis involving our students. They sort out competing and incompatible interpretations of events, legal concerns, and health and wellness issues. They deal with drug and alcohol problems, as well as new and challenging requests for physical accommodations. They serve a contemporary student population that is coming to us with more diagnosed psychological and learning problems. As a group, contemporary students arrive less prepared than in the past on academic and social fundamentals. They are often more demanding of us and, despite their new world of social media, are often living in considerable isolation from one another. In addition, today’s parents can be far more demanding on behalf of their children. They are less likely than earlier generations to see and support the University’s need for discipline and rules—particularly when these have any adverse impact on their own children.

“WE OWE ALL OF OUR STUDENT LIFE PROFESSIONALS OUR SINCEREST GRATITUDE...”
Of course, these new problems in the social environment of our students are offset by considerable new advantages. We have the most academically talented and diverse generation of students that Duquesne has ever had. We have had the luxury of increased student selectivity, bringing in classes with higher SAT scores and better high score performance. More of our students are “legacies.” Because their parents, aunts and uncles or siblings are graduates, they arrive here predisposed with their family’s love for Duquesne and our traditions. Our students have an exceptionally keen commitment to service, bringing hours of energy to the needs of others and to concern for the environment. They have an instinctive respect for diversity, a natural revulsion at injustice, and a genuine interest in learning from the experiences of other cultures. They also have a deep spiritual yearning. It is often unorthodox, following the lead of the heart; but it is nonetheless real and most significant. The University has also been blessed by generations of outstanding student leaders who have made significant positive contributions to the growth of their peers. And today’s parents, themselves the most educated in our history, are powerful allies and supporters when we communicate regularly and effectively with them.

Our Student Life professionals deal with these new realities—the challenges and the opportunities. They ensure in the most palpable and lasting ways that we serve the spark of the Spirit in every student within a context of an entire university community that serves the Spirit Who Gives Life.

“We HAVE THE MOST ACADEMICALLY TALENTED AND DIVERSE GENERATION OF STUDENTS THAT DUQUESNE HAS EVER HAD.”
Our relationship with students begins with our Admissions Office. They have been doing an outstanding job for all of us by bringing us both the numbers of students we need for the financial well-being of the University, as well as the quality we desire to remain in the first tier of American Catholic higher education. There was a time, and not so long ago, when we were largely a Pittsburgh school. For many high school students in those days, we were the “fall back” application because our easier standards guaranteed them admission even if they were denied entry to their higher choices. We have freed ourselves from that unenviable station in life. Now we have become increasing selective, named year after year as the first or second preference by the overwhelming majority of our new freshmen. This lifts the content and tone of classroom performance across the University. It also creates an initial high level of satisfaction; our students genuinely want to be here. And that, in turn, leads to very high retention and graduation rates. Despite this rise in standards across the board, there are still students at the lower end of our Admissions spectrum. We have sustained our commitment to give them a special person-to-person helping hand through our Spiritan Division, a program with a remarkable history of success.

At the far end of Admissions is the role that the Office of Career Services and our other placement efforts play in supporting our students as they transition from our Bluff to the world of work. Alums do not forget the faculty member or administrator whose efforts for them led to a first job. And younger alums are grateful for the important role that Alumni Relations plays in structuring the networking they need for career advancement.
We have made real gains in the diversity of the students we admit and in their retention. This is a challenging arena for us given the cost of our tuition and the characteristics of the populations from which we draw many of our students. Pittsburgh, for example, has no sizable Latino or Native American population; nor is there a large Asian community. Our African-American community in Pittsburgh is larger and of great historical importance to Duquesne and to the City. But much of it is suffering presently from relatively poor high school preparation and very high rates of poverty and unemployment. Nevertheless, we have invested considerable time and financial aid resources in making progress here. We have also seen an increase in our international student population. The Offices of Multicultural Affairs and International Programs are especially important for us in helping all our students thrive and graduate on time.
Throughout Student Life, as in all of academia, we are now in an age of assessment. Sometimes this concept is given an overly onerous complexion or made unnecessarily complicated. In its simplest terms, assessment is asking the students we are serving to rate our performance and then using those ratings, appropriately interpreted, to improve our service. I add “appropriately interpreted” because students may at times have unreasonable expectations of cost and feasibility. But assessment is most often a very useful exercise. Recently, we assessed our students’ opinion of our food service, for example. We uncovered a surprising degree of dissatisfaction. As a result, we have been able to make changes to improve the situation. Some changes were easy to make: extended hours in the dining halls, for example. Some were not so easy but are far more important in the long run. The recent large-scale renovation of the Hogan Dining Hall and movement of the convenience store to the front of the Towers are examples.

“...ASSESSMENT IS ASKING THE STUDENTS WE ARE SERVING TO RATE OUR PERFORMANCE AND...USING THOSE RATINGS...IMPROVE OUR SERVICE.”
The demand to live on campus is at an all-time high and we welcome it. Twelve years ago, the on-campus population was small. It was overwhelmingly freshmen because they alone were obliged to live on campus if they were not living at home. Our first change was to make the same rule apply to sophomores. This immediately doubled the on-campus population. Then we purchased Brottier, which had been owned and operated in the middle of our campus by an independent for-profit corporation. This completed our ownership of the entire Bluff. It also added new on-campus housing options, providing apartment-style living and with it the addition of large numbers of seniors. The recent opening of our beautiful new Des Places Hall adds another piece to that strategy by concentrating on the housing of juniors.

This new presence of large numbers of upper-class residents has enlivened and matured our on-campus population. A larger population of seniors and juniors also anchors the leadership of many of our student organizations on campus where they meet and perform their activities. This strategy has helped to generate its own demand; more than half of all our undergraduates now live on campus. We now have historic highs for on-campus residence and the largest concentration of students living in downtown Pittsburgh. This has required a commitment to upgrade all our residential facilities. We have already accomplished major renovations in Assumption, St. Martin’s and St. Ann’s. Now we are embarked on a ten-year, hundred-million dollar project to renovate the Towers. This is our largest living learning center. It badly needs attention to keep up with improvements all around it—and with the expectations of contemporary students.

At the same time, we have an important commuting population, a smaller percentage of our freshmen and sophomores than in the past, but nearly half of our undergraduate population. We are working to provide them with a more supportive environment on campus. The University is also making efforts to improve our relations with the South Side community where so many of our upper classmen live and to facilitate their movement back and forth to campus with our new highly successful shuttle service.
One lesson that is clear from reflections by alumni, particularly younger alumni, is that they do not so readily compartmentalize their Duquesne experience as we sometimes do. As faculty, we tend to remember a student as an outstanding major who got a fellowship for further study or an important first job in our professional area. In Student Life, we tend to remember a student as an effective resident advisor or president of a Greek organization. As a coach, we tend to remember a student as an outstanding athlete on the court or field. In Music or Campus Ministry, we may remember the student as an inspirational performer. Each of these perspectives is true—but only so far as it goes.

What we too often miss is that our students are all of the above and all at the same time. As resident advisors, they are also students with exams who are looking for a graduate program or that important first job. As academic leaders in the classroom and lab, they are also basketball fans. As the presidents of sororities, they are also leading athletes and fundraisers for service projects. As liturgical performers at Mass, they are also eating in our dining halls, exercising in our Power Center, enjoying the campus, using our parking garage, and benefiting—or not—from all the things we do or fail to do to make their Duquesne experience everything that it can be.

It is the power of these connections—rarely any one of them alone—that shapes the attachment of alumni to their Alma Mater. Behind all our efforts of education, in and out of the classroom, should be the goal of creating a lifelong bonding of alums to Duquesne. This will continue their own education in the Spirit and their support for our continued work with other students who will follow them. This bonding comes through the quality of the whole “Duquesne experience,” both in all its parts but also as more than the sum of its parts. Every student who graduates is a representative, an ambassador, for the intangibles that they experienced here. When those intangibles add up to a positive “Duquesne experience,” we have a lifetime of support for all that we are and want to be as a great University.

“ IT IS THE POWER OF THESE CONNECTIONS...THAT SHAPES THE ATTACHMENT OF ALUMNI TO THEIR ALMA MATER.”
An exception, or at least a sophistication, to this point lies in our relationship with our Law and graduate students. They are less concerned for the whole “Duquesne experience.” Presumably, that was part of their own undergraduate lives. Their primary goal with us is to develop a professional identity and to maintain it in their links with us throughout their careers. To be frank, our work in these areas has been far too decentralized in the past. It has been left largely to schools and departments, often without the resources to deal effectively with them. Only recently, for example, have we begun coordinating graduate admissions, financial aid and enrollment from a University-wide perspective. Yet graduate studies have considerable importance for us, not only for our budget, but also for the University’s reputation in the academic and professional worlds. Recently, our School of Law has turned an important corner in scholarship and national recognitions. We have increased graduate stipends in our Ph.D. programs to attract and retain better graduate students. But more work lies ahead of us here in reconstructing our University processes and improving our graduate programs.
Admitting this sophistication, however, the general point remains. Our students are here experiencing a continuum that is often poorly captured by the divisions of our University. This is why it is so important for us to constantly seek ways of integrating our perspectives to more closely approximate that of our students. It is especially important for Student Life and Academic Affairs to work closely together, since these are the main constituents of most of our students’ experiences. We are already making several important contributions in this arena of Student Life and Academic Affairs collaboration that I want to cite in particular. First are the learning communities of the McAnulty College. Putting freshmen who are living together in the same residence into the same thematic courses reinforces the point of a living learning center. Another residentially-based academic program for a large number of undergraduate schools is our highly successful Honors College. It has made Assumption Hall the home for some of our very best students. Our service learning program regularly integrates lessons we have learned and contacts we have developed through community service outreach with academic reflection and course work. We are national leaders in this area. Finally, our Italian Campus Program and our other study abroad opportunities integrate living and learning in settings that are exceptionally enriching. The impact of these experiences is profound and lasts a lifetime.

“THE IMPACT OF THESE EXPERIENCES IS PROFOUND AND LASTS A LIFETIME.”
There is another part of the lives of many of our students that we should not undervalue: athletics. Approximately, 375 of our students compete for Duquesne in a varsity sport. They all have roommates, friends, parents, and fans directly touched by their participation on their teams. But all of us have a stake in our athletic program because every uniform of every team bears our university’s name. Their public representation of us is therefore part of all of our students’ identities—as well as that of our alums, and of yours and mine. When our students excel, when they show themselves to be outstanding students and human beings, we take pride in them. When the reverse is the case, it is nonetheless also our name on their shirts and helmets. This is good reason for constant vigilance about quality recruiting, compliance with NCAA regulation, and moral character throughout the athletic arena.

There is good reason to be proud here. Last fall, two-thirds of our student-athletes or 235 of them attained a 3.0 GPA or better. Thirty percent of them reached a 3.5 or better and were named to the A10 Commissioner’s Honor Roll.

There is another dimension of University athletics worth reflecting upon periodically. Why do we, why should we, invest what we do in sports, particularly in our most expensive sports of basketball and football? There is, of course, a direct value for our students and for the ongoing identification of our alums with the University. But there is also the opportunity for regional and national prominence through achievement in these sports. We all appreciate the impact of the positive presence of Duquesne’s name in the media; its value in recruiting students, alumni support and fundraising. We have all seen the electrifying effect that an outstanding NCAA performance by a team can have on its home university. We all know that several of the leading Catholic universities in America entered and have sustained that leading position through first-rate athletics programs. This is part of our commitment as well. It is demonstrated in the quality of our athletic administration and coaching staffs, as well as in the athletic facilities we own and use. For example, over the last several years the Palumbo Center has been renovated top to bottom, and there is not a better basketball facility in all of the Atlantic 10 athletic conference than the CONSOL Energy Center.
Another area of investment in Student Life specifically and our life together on our Bluff generally is the appearance of our campus. I have already touched on the importance of our new and renovated residence halls in helping to move us from a Pittsburgh school to a national university. The Power Center, our new attractive presence along Forbes Avenue, the acquisition of select properties on our periphery, and on-going work to rebuild and update our campus—these are all parts of a single strategy. We want visitors to our campus, particularly potential students and their parents, to see us as a beautiful, contemporary, and safe urban environment. In the daylong visit that is so influential in determining whether a potential student becomes a Duquesne student, there is little opportunity for in-depth presentations and assessments of the quality of our range of academic programs. But there is plenty of time for a first general impression. Our long-term success depends on the positive quality of that first impression. And we have made great strides. Now visitors, and alums who have been away for years, regularly call our campus “beautiful.” This is not a word that earlier generations on our Bluff would have spontaneously used, and it is high praise for an urban campus. When that impression of beauty and safety is combined with our reputation for academic quality and the proximity of all the opportunities of one of America’s great cities, the argument for Duquesne University becomes truly persuasive.
There is a final aspect of our environment that is critical for the development of our students’ self-respect and their respect for one another. We must recommit ourselves again and again to maintain an atmosphere on campus of civility and freedom from discrimination, both in face-to-face relations and through our social media. Our RAs, RDs, advisors to our student organizations, Campus Ministry, the Office of Multicultural Affairs, and the Office of Student Conduct—all these professionals are on the first line of defense for us here. They are teaching in their work what it means to be part of a Catholic Spiritan academic community. But their efforts must be reinforced by what our students see and hear across the rest of the University. If a student in a living learning center is disciplined for incivility to a student down the hall, but then hears of the same sort of incivility—or worse—among faculty in her major, our teaching moment is lost. If a student is corrected for an act of sexual harassment but sees the same kind of harassment—or worse—among the staff in his department’s administration, the life lesson is compromised. Therefore, our obligation to promote self-respect and mutual respect among our students begins in our obligation to do the same among ourselves in the faculty, staff and administration. We must be, and indeed we rarely fail to be, role models of civility and mutual respect for our students and for one another. Thank you to our Student Life professionals for their leadership in this regard and to every member of the Duquesne community for making this a University that we can all be proud of.

This achievement, as well as all these other matters involving our care for our students, is ultimately about faithfulness to our history and to our Spiritan identity and mission. Because we are Spiritan, we are a Catholic university with deep ecumenical commitments. Because we are Catholic and Spiritan, we welcome all who wish to join us in our work with the Spirit Who Gives Life. Because we are Duquesne University of the Holy Spirit we do all these good things for one overriding reason: We serve God by serving students.
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