

Conversation About the Future: Toward a Culture of Possibilities

By: President Richard L. McCormick

Overview

During my annual address last fall, I invited the University community to take part in a yearlong Conversation About the Future that would lead to a collective understanding of our greatest opportunities and responsibilities in a changing world. With unit-level strategic planning underway in departments, schools and colleges, the Conversation was the next step in a University-wide focus on planning that began with my presidency five years ago. It was a chance to bring together the many voices and perspectives necessary to set a course for the years ahead. Through more than 85 organized events, and hundreds more informal discussions, the Conversation drew our community together in new and special ways. People talked to people they had never met before. Imaginations were elevated. New possibilities were created.

Everyone who participated in the Conversation will have an individual response to the meaning and significance of this experience. Rather than present a consensus summary, my intention with this report is to provide my own perspectives on the most important issues to emerge. A complete record of the Conversation, along with several other informative summaries and reports, can be found on the Conversation About the Future Web site at <http://www.washington.edu/change/future/bulletin.htm>.

The Conversation began as an open invitation to members of the University community to re-examine core missions and values in light of the tremendous transformations underway in higher education and to talk about issues most important to the future of this institution. As such, the Conversation did not produce any single plan or vision for the future. It wasn't intended to. Instead, the Conversation was meant to create, in the words of Geography Professor Victoria Lawson, a "culture of possibilities."

What emerged from the Conversation was a notable commonality of perspectives about this University's strengths and challenges. In my view, three themes predominated: a shared ambition for the future excellence of the University, a strong desire to enhance the bonds of community, and a persistent concern about the need for sufficient resources to realize our highest aspirations. These are the foundations of a "culture of possibilities."

The first theme, a heartfelt ambition for this University, came through in every discussion. Whether pointing with pride to the University's accomplishments or conveying frustration over obstacles in their way, people expressed the highest aspirations for what our University can achieve. This ambition was voiced in different ways. For some, it was a drive to be the most competitive research University in the nation. For others, it was a desire to offer the most progressive liberal arts education possible. At its heart, it was an ambition for this University to make a meaningful and lasting contribution to society.

Along with this ambition was a pervasive yearning for community. People want to be connected to each other and to the important work that goes on here. They want to see more diversity at the UW, and a more welcoming, respectful environment for everyone. They want to be connected to the community outside of the University and to see their work make a positive difference in the lives of people in this state. The importance of strengthening the bonds of community reaches beyond a desire to feel good about the University. It is essential for achieving the University's full potential.

Underlying these two themes was a frustration over the existence of so many boundaries between: the University and the state, the University and the local community, one discipline and another, faculty and students, faculty and staff, and the list goes on. The Conversation drove home the need to bridge the divisions that keep us from doing our best work.

A final theme of the Conversation, more implicit than explicit, was a need for more resources to pursue our ambitions. This came through in the desire to develop new interdisciplinary programs; recruit and retain faculty and staff; address salary inequities and resource disparities; expand minority outreach, recruitment and support programs; increase scholarships; and improve technology.

While most of the themes that emerged over the past year are not new, the Conversation brought them into clearer focus. It reinforced ideas from the recent strategic planning in departments, programs, schools and colleges. Both the Conversation and the planning efforts have shaped my goals for the University during the year ahead and will influence our directions for the future.

A Diversity of Voices and Perspectives

The Conversation inspired a variety of forums, symposia and informal discussions on a myriad of topics involving all the University's constituencies. The following events are representative:

- The Faculty Senate hosted a five-part lecture and discussion series that explored whether the traditional model of liberal arts education still serves students' needs.
- The Board of Deans held a two-day retreat to consider the academic challenges that lie ahead. They raised essential questions for the future and suggested possible actions that the University could take to remain competitive.
- The Board of Regents hosted a series of dinners that engaged distinguished guests from inside and outside the University community in discussing issues critical to the future.
- Former student Regent Chris Knaus and I met with students from 18 divisions, colleges and schools to discuss issues of concern to them and their peers. More than 450 students participated.
- The President's Advisory Committee on Diversity sponsored events exploring issues related to racial diversity in academia and society.

- The Professional Staff Organization held a series of discussions on a variety of work-related issues.
- The President's Staff Forum sponsored an event featuring futurist Glen Hiemstra and hosted a series of staff discussions on topics ranging from professional enhancement to community building.
- Undergraduate and graduate students participated in a quarter-long class given by the Comparative History of Ideas (CHID) Program that considered how the University might work more effectively to reach its goals. The "Rethinking the University" course culminated in a report evaluating the University and suggesting actions for improvement.
- The Graduate and Professional Student Senate sponsored a series of discussions on the future of graduate and professional education at the University.
- Meetings were held with civic leaders in Spokane, Vancouver and Wenatchee to discuss issues of concern to those communities.

Major theme: Ambition for Future Excellence

One of the most important discoveries of the Conversation was the University-wide sense of ambition. This ambition was not fundamentally about the UW's prestige or national rankings. It was about advancing our students' learning, expanding human knowledge and serving the public good.

The sense of ambition emerged in a Board of Deans' report summarizing its retreat: "As a leading public research university, the University of Washington strives for the highest levels of excellence that will maintain and enhance our position as one of the world's distinguished institutions of higher learning. . . . Our efforts produce results that have significance to the State, region, nation, and at times, the world."

The sense of ambition came through in the faculty's emphasis on the higher values served by a liberal arts education. "Liberal education is that education that helps to make the person who experiences it free," wrote former Faculty Senate Chairman Gerry Philipsen in a report summarizing the Faculty Senate series. "Free . . . to engage in the life of a democratic society. . . . free to participate in power and free to think beyond their narrow specialties."

Many of our students expressed ambition for more connections to the larger community. "The College should prepare teachers to instill a greater sense of community and the responsibility of the student as a citizen," said participants in the College of Education student forum. A group of staff members expressed similar aspirations. "We need to promote volunteerism and volunteer opportunities for faculty and staff," said participants in a staff discussion sponsored by the President's Staff Forum. "This would increase community support for the UW, and give us a chance to give something back."

Academic Innovation

For many, this aspiration translated into an enthusiasm for academic innovation, including interdisciplinary collaboration and student involvement in research, experiential learning and community projects.

Students were interested in interdisciplinary study, research and community-based experiential learning for two primary reasons: they wanted more practical preparation for their careers and more opportunities to improve the world around them. “Students felt that cross-departmental coursework and greater interdisciplinary freedom were necessary to both attract more students and prepare them for work in the real world. They expressed concern that they did not know enough beyond theory to be of greatest benefit to their eventual clients,” said a summary of the School of Social Work student forum. This outward orientation of students was encouraging and inspiring. Our students are determined to use their education to make the world a better place.

Students and faculty voiced frustration at barriers preventing increased collaboration and student research. Those included too many course requirements, insufficient resources to develop new programs and lack of awareness of existing opportunities. They also noted difficulty in navigating different departments, and the priority given to students of the home department. “Many professors and students are historically, institutionally, and professionally restricted from engaging in interdisciplinary scholarship. . . . Students . . . feel thwarted from preparing to meet the increasingly diverse expectations in today’s job market: the need to synthesize multiple viewpoints, the ability to work in a team setting across disciplinary lines,” wrote students in the CHID report.

Some students voiced concern about the quality of teaching. “Students felt professors were sometimes obstacles to learning with outdated teaching styles (dubbed the ‘pulpit mentality’), inability to make expectations clear, and limited interaction with students,” said a summary of a discussion series hosted by the Teaching Academy. Students want better training for teaching assistants and rewards for good teaching equivalent to those received for research.

Faculty and students expressed a desire to raise the overall academic standards of the University. They argued that the University needs to set higher expectations in order to achieve its academic goals and encourage the best from everyone. Participants in a Faculty Senate forum on liberal education summed it up this way: “One group mentioned the dearth of excellence; we don’t encourage or expect it enough. Through promoting and modeling excellence we can inspire students to become scholars and determine for themselves what it takes to make a good life (not just a good job).”

The critical role of research to the University’s future was also emphasized in the Conversation. “The University of Washington has been extremely successful in competing for research funds and the future excellence of the institution depends on maintaining our competitive edge in research,” said participants in the Board of Deans

retreat. They noted the need to encourage interdisciplinary research, which attracts funding and where major discoveries tend to occur. They also stressed the importance of attracting and retaining the best faculty, providing adequate physical facilities and supporting new opportunities in emerging fields.

There was a widespread recognition that high quality application of information technology is a valuable tool that can enhance teaching, learning and research. There was also concern that technology not be allowed to replace the interpersonal interactions that are an essential part of learning. “A significant element in graduate and undergraduate education is learning through peer review and peer mentoring. Distance learning . . . cannot compensate for the interpersonal communication and the relationships students develop with their peers through daily contact,” said participants at a discussion hosted by the Graduate and Professional Student Senate (GPSS). Faculty, staff and students also pointed to the need for improved access to technology, training and support.

Others noted that the University is at the forefront of information technology and has already benefited greatly from it. The Board of Deans in its report pointed to the award-winning UWired program to transform teaching and learning through technology, the UW’s participation in Internet II and leadership in the development of the Washington K-20 network. “All of these achievements have greatly expanded our capacity for offering various forms of learning including distance education,” the report said. The Board of Deans stated that the challenge now is to “ensure that technological infrastructure remains at the highest level and access to technology is widely available to faculty, students and staff.”

Liberal Arts

At the heart of the Conversation was the discussion of the future of liberal arts education raised by the Faculty Senate forums and by many other groups throughout the year. This discussion leads us back to our core values and to what many at the University believe is our highest calling. Throughout this discussion, members from all parts of our community spoke passionately about the importance of a liberal arts education in teaching critical thinking, exposing students to different perspectives, and giving them the ability to see beyond their narrow specialties. They said a liberal arts education instills a sense of ethics and social responsibility and prepares students to participate in civic life. “If there is one conclusion that can be drawn from the conversation as a whole it is that the faculty, students, and administration of this university spoke with a nearly unified voice in support of the importance of the kind of broad, general, and socially grounded education that falls under the heading ‘liberal education,’” said the summary report of the Faculty Senate series.

The Faculty Senate series raised the essential question of what it means to be an educated person in the 21st century. “The educated person should have experiences in reflective thought, writing, speaking, engagement with significant texts, engagement with a discipline, and engagement with disciplines and persons that are different from oneself and one's specialized field of study,” said participants in one of the discussions.

These are the same attributes that business and political leaders say students need to work in the knowledge-based economy of the 21st century. “One of the most important contributions the UW can make is in liberal education at the undergraduate level,” said political and business leaders participating in a dinner hosted by Regent Gerald Grinstein. “This involves learning to solve problems, deal with ambiguity, establish relationships, and develop a future-oriented attitude.”

Some questioned whether the University was doing enough to provide a strong foundation in liberal arts. During a Faculty Senate forum, Professor Keith Benson of Medical History and Ethics noted that UW students applying to the medical school “excel in the amount of specialized training they have but fall far short of students from other institutions when asked to speak about ethical and social aspects of matters of life and death.”

Finally, some were uneasy about the future of liberal arts because disciplines within it typically do not attract the same type of financial resources as other disciplines do. “Who will speak for liberal education, which does not always enjoy the same ready access to corporate support and federal research dollars that other aspects of the University do?” asked the summary of the Faculty Senate series. “The support for liberal education must come . . . from within,” the summary concluded.

Throughout the Conversation, I heard an ambition to reach higher. I saw a community yearning for institutional change that will remove barriers and promote creativity and excellence. I found a community committed to advancing the public good and helping students achieve their fullest potential.

Major Theme: Hunger for Community

The most pronounced theme during the Conversation was the desire for more connection. “Isolation typifies the experience of many UW students and characterizes the student/university relationship. Students feel adrift in a sea of imposed academic requirements, special interest student organizations, and a general lack of knowledge regarding opportunities available,” said students taking the Rethinking the University course.

Staff expressed similar feelings. “Some felt they are second class citizens at the UW. There is no sense of being part of a team and Professional Staff feel less effort is made to include them in much of the UW’s culture,” said a summary of the Professional Staff Organization forums. Staff wanted more of a voice in the University community and more recognition for the value of their contributions. “The Professional Staff teach, do research, run large organizations and support every aspect of teaching and research accomplished at the UW, yet we are often invisible in budget and planning documents,” said the summary.

Staff had a variety of suggestions to deal with these concerns, such as improving University-wide communication, enhancing the existing staff awards, and addressing some of the larger life challenges, including doing more to provide affordable childcare. Staff, faculty and students all made a strong appeal for additional childcare on campus.

There was widespread agreement that the Conversation was an important community-building experience and that more such opportunities ought to be encouraged and supported. It was noteworthy that after practically every event, people came forward to ask if there would be other similar discussions. People were exhilarated by the opportunity to discuss ideas with colleagues they usually do not encounter in their daily interactions. In one of the first Faculty Senate discussions, when Kane Hall 110 was filled to standing room only, this yearning was nearly palpable. “It was the most electric moment I ever had on campus in my 25 years here,” one dean remarked later.

This desire for community extended beyond the confines of the University. Every constituency expressed the importance of the University strengthening its connections to the outside world. Some expressed a desire to make sure local research gives back directly to the community. “We need to make sure that part of the program is to empower the community. We continue to take from them, using them for our projects, without giving much back,” said participants at the School of Public Health and Community Medicine student forum. Others praised the University’s increased emphasis on partnerships with K-12 schools and wanted to see more.

Several noted the University’s reputation for being aloof and elitist. They pointed to the need for more meaningful interactions with the community. “The University cannot promote itself to the state based upon its standing as a ‘Level I Research Institution.’ It must find a more realistic connection to residents” said participants in one of the GPSS discussions. There was also considerable frustration over the lack of public awareness of the significant contributions the University is making. “The UW has a history of successful projects, however the success seems to go unnoticed due to the lack of an effective public relations message,” said participants in a dinner hosted by Regent Dan Evans.

Underlying this discussion was an appreciation for the tremendous resources and talent at this University and its ability to make a difference, both locally and nationally. Many talked about the important work the University is doing and the critical role it plays in addressing health, environmental and social problems and spurring economic development. “UW research competitiveness at a national level is key and must be preserved. There is huge payoff to the state in terms of economic development. . . . In addition to the UW’s critical role in jobs and economic development, the UW’s contribution to solving problems and building community is essential. The UW’s new commitment to K-12 is a good example,” said participants at Regent Gerald Grinstein’s dinner.

Diversity

Of all the topics raised, one of the issues that inspired the most passion was the need for more diversity in the University community, and in particular, racial diversity. The issue of diversity came up again and again, no matter what the subject or who was participating. In every constituency—students, staff, faculty, alumni—people expressed a sincere desire for greater diversity and an improved campus climate for all groups. There was a strong belief that everyone’s learning would be enhanced and the University would be a richer place if it were more diverse. The commitment to diversity was deep, widespread and heartfelt.

Many reasons for the need for increased diversity were voiced. Some spoke of the educational benefits, including teaching students different perspectives. “There is a significant lack of diverse representation throughout the college. The culture of engineering says to think outside the box, yet most students think similarly because they come from similar backgrounds. We need to expand the student and faculty pools to be able to foster outside-of-the-box thinking,” said participants in the College of Engineering student forum. Others noted that their ability to work with diverse groups of people could directly affect their capacity to do their jobs, particularly in the health care field. “Here an understanding of diverse populations can make a big difference in quality of care delivered, and there is no attention to it,” said students in the School of Nursing.

Still others spoke of the University’s moral responsibility to open educational opportunities to everyone. “Diversity should be important as an issue of access and associated social enfranchisement rather than simply as a quality that enhances education for everyone,” said participants in the GPSS student conversations.

Some participants praised the University for its efforts to increase the diversity of its community, including recent expansions of outreach and recruitment programs. But others noted that despite those efforts, the University still has a poor reputation for minority recruitment and needs to do more. “Community presence is not created by a recruiting trip, but rather, by sustained conversation and work around community issues,” said participants at a dinner hosted by former student Regent Chris Knaus.

The campus climate for underrepresented people was also of concern. Many remarked that the University does not offer a welcoming and supportive environment for minority students, faculty and staff. They noted there was subtle racism at the University and insufficient appreciation of the added pressures minorities often face. “There is currently a lot of pressure for African-American students. Not only having to think about getting good grades but also being a ‘representative’ of the African-American student body. There is a struggle for minority students pursuing careers in academia because they need to make compromises to be successful,” said participants at a dinner hosted by Regent Constance Proctor. Some suggested the need for more support, such as tutors and mentors. Others suggested the need for more diversity training for faculty and staff.

Major Theme: Resources for the Future

While it was not often raised explicitly, the need for solid financial support was mentioned indirectly throughout the year. For example, people talked about the necessity for more resources to develop new academic programs. “Faculty is trying to revise the curriculum to incorporate interdisciplinary expansion, but limited resources prevent moving beyond the discussion stage. The UW should put the resources behind these efforts,” said participants in the College of Ocean and Fishery Sciences student forum. People also talked about the need for more resources to increase diversity and improve campus climate. “The University does not provide adequate funding for students of diverse backgrounds, and should allocate or seek funds to enhance efforts supporting diversity in higher education,” said participants in one of the GPSS discussions. These are only some of the many ways in which this issue was raised during the Conversation.

The Board of Deans raised the issue directly noting that state support alone would not sustain the high quality of education at this institution and that the University needed to expand its funding base. “Funding diversification can arise from the UW considering the whole financial picture and focusing energy across a broader range and where biggest returns will come from,” the Board of Deans said.

Participants at a dinner hosted by Regent Shelly Yapp expressed similar ideas. “Going to the State for more money is not working. . . . this points to a need for finding better funding sources,” they said. At the same time, they stressed the need to continue to encourage increased state support. Participants were particularly concerned about low faculty salaries, which are state supported, and how they are affecting the University’s ability to attract and retain top faculty. “Competition is overwhelming, and it’s getting more difficult for the qualified (faculty) to decide to remain here. They are increasingly heading to places where students pay more (in tuition) and resources are better,” they said. They agreed that the University needs to do a better job of communicating its value to the state and building support for higher education. “Investment in education pays off for everyone in the state. We need to connect this message to a strategy for sufficient financing,” they said. “The public needs to think it has a public allegiance to fund education.”

The Conversation reinforced the fundamental need for sufficient resources. We simply cannot be in the forefront of educational transformation without more funding. The achievement of our goals depends upon it.

Conclusion

Although the year of formal events has ended, the Conversation is far from over. Its influence can be seen across campus. Students within the College of Education have established committees designed to address the themes they raised during their student forum. The CHID “Rethinking the University” course will continue its analysis of University life with a new group of graduate and undergraduate students. A University-wide forum on resources for the University’s future will be held on November 29.

The Conversation has also deeply influenced the one-year goals and long-term vision of the future expressed in the 2000-01 strategic emphases for the University administration. The three overarching goals for the upcoming year come directly from the Conversation and from the strategic planning in departments, programs, schools and colleges. They are:

- **Transforming the educational experience.** This goal includes expanding student opportunities for research and experiential learning; advancing new interdisciplinary programs; applying technology to teaching and learning; and increasing the diversity of our students, faculty and staff.
- **Strengthening the bonds of community:** This goal recognizes the yearning expressed during the Conversation for more connection, more boundary spanning and more attention to the climate and environment of our University community. Community building is a critical part of preparing us for the educational transformations ahead and for achieving the UW's highest ambitions. Specific goals include improving the racial and gender climate of our community; identifying ways to increase the availability of childcare for students, faculty and staff; and continuing to enhance and measure improvements in customer service orientation by University operations.
- **Obtaining resources for the University's future:** This goal responds to the universally recognized need for more funding that was highlighted during the Conversation. Goals for the year include securing the best possible state budget; working aggressively to build the UW's endowment; expanding the UW's technology transfer programs; increasing the University's already substantial research support; and reviewing the University's major programs of budgetary reallocation, including the University Initiatives Fund and the Tools for Transformation.

The three themes raised in the Conversation About the Future—ambition, community and resources—are all essential to the University's success. Only with all three can a “culture of possibilities” flourish. We have a wonderfully diverse, creative, intellectual community with a high level of commitment to the University of Washington. Working together with the same energy and imagination that we brought to the Conversation, we will inspire success. My most sincere thanks to all who participated in the Conversation. Listening to you has been a deeply satisfying and affirming experience.