

9/16/22

Opening Address

Welcome. I have thought a lot about what I might say to you today. I considered how this year might evolve, and what might serve as inspiration for the collective endeavor we are about to undertake. As is my process, I listened carefully to you and the sentiments you expressed as we returned to campus. I looked to the higher education news and other media sources to ground us in the current moment. And I hoped to find some pop-culture reference that might provide a connection between the words I say and the work we do.

It was through this process that I found myself returning to an essential document from June of 2019, written months before we entered a global pandemic. Throughout the intervening years, and the unforeseen events associated with them, there were many times I had to dig deep to find meaning in our work of higher education. I know that you were often there digging deep, too. When I reread the document now, refracted through my experiences of the years since it was written, new emphasis points appear to me – ones that I believe can guide us as we move into the coming academic year together. As I share these points with you, I hope to call us back to ourselves and our essential vocation, because it is precisely what I believe most joins us together.

It was in June of 2019, in a letter to the whole society, that Fr. Arturo Sosa, Superior General of the Society of Jesus, unveiled four apostolic preferences to guide the society's works over the next ten years. The preferences, developed by members of the society through a years-long process of discernment and endorsed by Pope Francis, identify what our founding order believes to be the best contribution – given who we are and what we have - that **we** - all of us engaged in Jesuit work - can make to the universal good.

Of particular interest to me now is Sosa's delineation of the preference to "***accompany young people in the creation of a hope-filled future.***" Writing prior to the start of the pandemic, the Father General noted that today's youth are confronted with enormous economic, social, environmental, and political injustices at a time when they are making major life decisions that will impact their future roles in society; and further that it is these same young people who - by their very decisions - will define the new humanity that will emerge from the challenges they face. Therefore, it is incumbent on those of us who gain meaning from our work with youth to help them live this stage of their life most profoundly.

**To help them live this stage of their life most profoundly** - What might it mean to help young people fully live this stage of their lives; and what does it mean for us, in our stage of life, to accompany them and offer our help?

In his most recent address to the assembly of the International Association of Jesuit Universities (IAJU) on August 4th of this year, the Father General acknowledged that those of us engaged in Jesuit higher education are called to do this work while facing daunting challenges of our own, challenges inherent to the daily life of universities. "*Tensions between academic excellence and the integral formation of persons. Tensions between rising to the demands of the day ... and offering a quality education without any sort of ... discrimination. Tensions between history, the tradition that has made the institution what is it, and the challenges of ... an uncertain future.*"

In speaking to the assembly, Fr. Sosa recognized that, "*these and many other tensions fill the minds, hearts, and daily work of those who ... [had gathered there];*" representing all of us who comprise Jesuit higher education world-wide.

**Minds, hearts and daily work full of tensions** characterize not just those of us who work at **Jesuit** colleges and universities, but those of us who work across the whole sector of higher education. Indeed, this week's Chronicle of Higher Education and Inside Higher Ed are replete with articles about leadership crises at state flagships; enrollment declines at HBCUs, at community colleges and among transfer students; and prestigious universities falsifying numbers to improve their rankings - all leading to burn-out, quiet quitting, and unprecedented resignations among our colleagues.

Further, this year's Global Emotions report from Gallup, suggests that we who work in higher education are not alone in our emotional experience. Recent Gallup poll results reveal that people worldwide are more worried, stressed and sad than they have been at any time in the past 16 years; and further that these negative emotions are not simply a response to the pandemic, as longitudinal trends demonstrate unhappiness has been rising globally for the past 10 years.

In his new book, Blind Spot: The Global Rise of Unhappiness and How Leaders Missed It (out just this week), Gallup's CEO Jon Clifton argues that citizen unhappiness - and more importantly global leaders' failure to attend to it - gave rise to political upheavals such as the Arab spring, Brexit, and election of Donald Trump. Similarly, other global think tanks have identified negative social and political forces currently at play that dilute democracy, give rise to autocratic leaders, and threaten the future of humanity - that same future of humanity the young people who we are supposed to be accompanying will create from the decisions they make while we journey with them.

As I speak these words to you, I know that it all begins to sound like a negative feedback loop – young people face big challenges, the decisions that they make in response to those challenges will define the future, we who are called to guide and support young people making those decisions work in institutions facing a range of tensions which contribute our version of the worldwide unhappiness that is leading to the very economic, political and social challenges facing today’s youth.

How to break the cycle?

Let’s return to the top of this speech, and our source document. In June of 2019, in a letter to the whole society, Fr. Arturo Sosa, Superior General of the Society of Jesus, unveiled four apostolic preferences to guide the society’s works over the next ten years. Of particular interest to me now is the preference that calls on us *“to accompany young people in the creation of a hope-filled future.”* There is one word in that phrase that I have yet to address – **hope.**

**Hope is the way forward.**

Over the past five to ten years, during the same time that the world was getting sadder, that democracy was on the decline, and that the pandemic started raging, *“a new science of hope”* was emerging within the field of positive psychology. As Dan Tomasulo explains in a July 2022 posting on Psychology Today, *“hope is the only positive emotion that requires negativity or uncertainty to be activated.”* As the Jesuits and their lay colleagues discerned in 2019, **in an uncertain world, hope presents itself as catalyst for a positive future.**

So then, what is hope? And how do we harness its power both for ourselves and for the youth we are accompanying?

In their article, What We Talk About When We Talk About Hope: A Prototype Analysis, published earlier this year in the journal Emotion, a team of Dutch psychologists offer a working definition of hope as “... *the belief that a positive future outcome is possible combined with the desire for that outcome.*” Said another way, **hope is the *want* for a positive future that one believes is achievable.**

In his Psychology Today piece, Tomasulo further argues that hope can jumpstart a **positive** feedback loop. Citing research published in The Journal of Positive Psychology in 2017, he identifies gratitude as a powerful prosocial activity that can initiate a cycle of kindness followed by wellbeing. Elevated by this positive emotion spiral, persons expend greater effort toward accomplishing their goals and willingly support the goals of others. Tomasulo suggests that we can fuel our own engines of positivity by practicing three hopeful behaviors - **gratitude, goal-setting, and kindness.**

Could it be that simple? Let’s try it.

**Gratitude** - As I stand before you, two and half years into a global pandemic and only five months removed from my own cancer diagnosis, I am grateful for the health of our community and for the tireless efforts of the staff in the Student Health Center and across campus who have worked to maintain our community’s health. I am grateful for the health that brings you to work every day, and for the effort you expend to keep yourself and those around you healthy.

I am grateful for the health that allows me to be here today and for the excellent medical care that I received. Above all, and in ways I can barely begin to measure, I am grateful

for the generosity, love and support from so many of you that helped to restore my health over the last several months. Thank you.

It feels really good to say it—I hope it feels good to hear it, too.

We are off to a good start, as gratitude has ripple effects that extend outward, seemingly endlessly. As I think about the students who are packed into our residence halls, bursting from our classrooms, and breaking our graduate enrollment records, I am grateful to each of them and to their families for entrusting us with their futures. I am grateful for the 1342 souls who join us as first year students in the class of 2026, for the 92% of students in the class of 2025 who have returned to us as sophomores, for the students in the classes of 2024 and 2023 who are on track to graduate within four years, and for the 1234 students enrolled in 9800 credits worth of graduate courses.

As I consider the slate of college rankings that have been released recently, I am grateful for your dedication to those students – efforts that propel us to be recognized by Princeton Review as among the 388 Best Colleges in the country, and most notably to be ranked as 23<sup>rd</sup> for best run institutions. Thank you for all you do to ensure this institution runs well.

I am grateful to be the Chief Academic Officer at the highest ranked university that entered the National Universities category in the US News and World Report this year; and most especially I am grateful for the commitment of our professors in and out of the classroom that resulted in Fairfield University being tied for 29<sup>th</sup> in the nation on US News' specialty ranking for Best Undergraduate Teaching.

**Goal-Setting:** As we begin the academic year, I am pleased to share with you several important goals that we are well on our way to achieving - goals related to expansion, organizational capacity, and talent.

In the area of **expansion** – we are poised to launch academic programs in two new locations this year. First, faculty in the Egan School, under the direction of Dean Meredith Kazer, working in collaboration with colleagues in the Office of the Provost, finance, facilities, marketing and communications, legal affairs, and human resources are preparing to open a new location in Austin Texas at which we will offer our successful second degree nursing program to educate persons who have already earned a bachelor’s degree and who want to enter the field of nursing in order to find meaning in the contribution they can make to the growing health care needs in the southwest. Our goal is to have nursing students in Texas by summer of next year.

Second, following the approval of Associate’s degree programs by the Academic Council at the end of last year, and in keeping with the Council’s motions, the Office of the Provost has been working to *“develop a plan for coordinating the implementation of these... programs and supporting the students who enroll in them.”* In partnership with the Society of Jesus and the Diocese of Bridgeport, I have appointed a new academic administrator, Vice Provost and Executive Director Kevin O’Brien, SJ to oversee these programs at St. Ambrose, a diocesan owned property in the city of Bridgeport. Fr. O’Brien comes to Fairfield having previously held academic and administrative positions at Georgetown and Santa Clara universities, and is teaching for the department of religious studies this semester. [Kevin is unable to be here but

will be joining us later at the reception. I encourage you to introduce yourself and welcome him to our scholarly community.]

To work along with Fr. O'Brien, I am pleased to have hired Nakia LaTang as Director of Admissions and to have Anisa DeMatteo appointed to support fund raising for the project. Next week we will extend an offer to a candidate to join this growing staff as Assistant Dean for Student Success in order to ensure supports are in place for students from the moment they enroll. I thank the Academic Council for a robust conversation about this implementation plan earlier this week, and I look forward to continued engagement with them as we identify faculty to serve on search committees for an Associate Dean to coordinate the academic programs at this new location, and to hire new professors to teach in those programs.

Additionally, in collaboration with colleagues from operations, finance, facilities, enrollment management, marketing and communications, human resources, legal affairs and the Office of the President, a project plan with over 400 workstreams is well underway to ensure the launch of what we are now calling the **Bellarmino initiative** in September of next year. Faculty and staff can stay up to date on the progress of this initiative through a newly created internal resource site that will be accessible beginning next week through the Provost's page on the University's website.

In the area of **organizational capacity**, as you have seen in announcements this week, the University is undertaking a transition from Banner to Workday Student to serve as our next generation student information system. Working with external consultants from Accenture, and under the joint leadership of CIO Jon Carroll, Vice Provost Mark Ligas, and Director of Institutional Research Amy Boczer, a Steering Committee completed a business process analysis



of our system functions last year, and will be undertaking a detailed data analysis in the coming year to be on track to launch Workday Student as our new information system by fall of 2025.

Also, in the area of organizational capacity, colleagues in the offices of Human Resources and Legal Affairs undertook a comprehensive revision of the Employee Handbook last year to ensure that our personnel policies and practices are clear and consistent, aligned with federal and state labor laws, and support the rights of all who are employed by Fairfield University. Following on the decision of the Committee on Free Expression Resolution, our goal this year is to refine the free speech policies for staff outlined in the Employee Handbook to make sure that those policies are also aligned with the University's principles for free expression.

Additionally, last year, a subcommittee of the Academic Council began what is likely to be a multi-year process to revise the Faculty Handbook. I am pleased to join General Faculty Secretary Steve Bayne and faculty colleagues Susan Rakowitz and Alison Kris in this work this year as we strive to ensure a system of shared governance that can respond to the needs and work at the cadence required of a national doctoral professional university.

Finally, in the area of **talent**, I am pleased to welcome many new colleagues as we start the academic year. At the same time, I recognize that our growing enrollments, a number of recent transitions, and expansion plans require us to increase talent and staffing across many areas of the University. I am pleased to announce that we start the year with a long-range plan for faculty hiring that includes the approval of 37 faculty searches to be undertaken this year. Our goal is to welcome new faculty colleagues to those roles this time next year. Additionally, we are actively working on re-organization plans and associated staff hiring in the areas of

Student Life, University Registrar, Office of Accessibility, Office of Research and Grants, and the Library. I thank colleagues in all of those divisions and departments, as well as in the Office of the Provost, human resources, and finance for their help as we set a goal to hire more staff in each of those areas throughout the academic year.

With all this work to do and these many goals to achieve, the last element of how we build our belief in a hope-filled future is essential.

**Kindness.** In his August address to the assembly of the International Association of Jesuit Universities, as an antidote to the ills that plague both our institutions and our societies, Fr. Arturo Sosa reminded our representatives in attendance that *“The Church understands itself to be the People of God on the move, to which each person contributes according to his or her identity and talents,”* and that it is through intercultural and intergenerational dialogue and collaboration that we can *“... build and maintain the unity of minds and hearts that gives meaning to the institution.”*

To achieve the goals that we have for the year will require dialogue and collaboration – across cultures, across generations, and across departments. We will be most successful if we engage each other with the kindness that allows each of us to flourish.

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In preparing these remarks for you today, I listened to the range of sentiments you were expressing – some anxious and some hopeful. I looked to the current popular press and research literature for citations that echoed those sentiments, and provided rationales for them. I returned to source documents from our Jesuit founders that unite us in mission. And – I know you have been waiting for it - to close, I managed to find a pop-culture reference that

might connect the words I am saying to the range of feelings we are experiencing, to the current moment, and to the work ahead in ways that can inspire us.

In recent weeks, Kwame Alexander, National Public Radio's poet-in-residence called on listeners to "*set a non-negotiable goal*" for the coming year, and to submit those goals as lines for common poem. The result was a crowd-sourced poem of **hope for the new academic year**. With each line taken from either a student or a teacher who wrote into NPR on the eve of their school year, it reads in part:

*This Year Shall Be Different*

*I want to teach my [students] there is a hopeful future still ahead*

*And that [people] like themselves - dogged and bent and quirky and kind-*

*Are going to make it.*

*I want to Wipe away their tears*

*Confront all their fears,*

*Step into the need*

*Give them voice and choice,*

*seek to employ*

*a house of greater joy.*

*THEN stop good [colleagues] from leaving.*

*Because We are scaffolding somebody's a sweeter society*

Because **we** are scaffolding a sweeter society, Fairfield colleagues, I pledge to you to set the non-negotiable goal that we will reimagine our work; and I call on you to set your own goal to do so

along with me. Because of all we have learned, all we have been through together, all we mean to one another, and all we still **want** for ourselves and for those in our care, we must evolve. Each of us will evolve in our own ways - it will likely include all the variations that comprise our sweet society – but I know that we will do so together, with kindness and in gratitude.

Thank you and Welcome to the new year.

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