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Mission, Renewal, Defining Our Future

Our convocation today is a celebration. We celebrate the dedication of some of our colleagues. We celebrate the future promise of other colleagues. And we celebrate the beginning of a new semester, a new year, and a new national administration and the promise of each.

We have accomplished much. We have taken important steps to rebuild our undergraduate enrollment. We have attracted new faculty members and academic leaders as well as talented staff members to join our work at the university. We have reinvigorated our governance structures through of the leadership of the university and staff senates and the provost. I am very grateful to Fr. Bob Gerlich, S.J., Bret Jacobs, and Ed Kvet for their leadership on these matters. We have begun to address important, short-term facilities needs to better serve our students and faculty. And, we have maintained the fiscal health of the university. Our fiscal health is important not as an end in itself but for the strength it gives us going forward to realize our dreams. We have accomplished a great deal.

Since fall 2008, Loyola has:

- ranked fifth Best Master's University in the South in the 2009 edition of *America's Best Colleges* by *U.S. News & World Report* (Up from No. 6 in 2008).
- ranked No. 1 in *U.S. News & World Report's* Great Schools, Great Prices category.
- ranked seventh in the Princeton Review's Best College Libraries 2009 list, along with Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, and Columbia. *This is the third year in a row that Loyola's library has made the top 10.*

In addition:

- the College of Social Sciences was named one of the Great Schools for Communications Majors and Great Schools for Journalism Majors by Princeton Review.
- both the Colleges of Business and Law are listed by the Princeton Review as 2008 Top Schools.
- 22 percent of our 2008 Wolfpack athletes are recognized as NAIA Scholar-Athletes, with average GPAs of 3.5-plus.
- And Loyola ranks No. 16 in Best Town-Gown Relationship by the Princeton Review, which recognizes students that get along well with members of the local community. Loyola moved up from No. 20 this year.

Sal Liberto, our vice president for enrollment management, and his team in Admissions are working hard to recruit and admit next year's first year class. For next year our applications are up over 13 percent and our campus visits are up 40 percent. We expect the fall 2009 class to be as strong academically as the fall 2008 undergraduate first-year class, and we expect the first year class for 2009 to be more geographically diverse as we continue to reclaim our national market share. We are projecting improvements in retention of our current students and growth in the overall size of the first year class.

There are other positive signs for enrollment such as the increase in applications from international markets, especially Latin and Central America. We are capturing more "early actors" in the application cycle, with visits and applications. This is good news for us, as these students tend to be the strongest and most serious students. We continue to enjoy great ethnic and economic diversity in the application pool.

The admissions team will be hosting a President's Open House on March 28 as an event for accepted students and their families. Faculty will be invited to

contact accepted students. We know that those contacts are exciting for students and pivotal in their decision-making.

Our fundraising efforts are another good sign of our health and strength. Even in this difficult economic climate cash gifts to the university as of December 31 are running 7 percent ahead of last year. The Board of Trustees, under the leadership of Suzanne Mestayer, our chair, has responded with an effort to increase the number and the size of board gifts. And, of course I want to thank all the faculty and staff members who have made pledges to the annual fund.

We have done much. We should take a moment to recognize and celebrate what we have been able to accomplish. And we should celebrate those who have made these achievements possible: you. It is through the hard work of you, our faculty and staff, the leadership of our Board of Trustees, and the generosity of our benefactors that we have been able to do what we have done. The dedicated, creative work of our faculty and staff is a key to our success. It is fitting, as we celebrate a new semester, and our achievements that we should celebrate the dedicated service of faculty members, staff members, the outstanding examples like John Clark who exemplifies the seamless connection of teaching, research, and service in all that he does.

Today we pause to celebrate what we have accomplished. But we have much to do. The challenge before us, simply put, is to choose and create our future. Given the turbulent, evolving nature of New Orleans, the Gulf South, and the nation, we cannot simply wait for the future to happen to us. We have the

opportunity to shape the future of the university and decide what the future of the university will be.

At the start of this academic year, I asked the provost, with the leadership of the faculty, staff, and students, and the other vice presidents, to create a new strategic plan for the university. Creating this plan is creating the road map we need to achieve our dreams. I set a deadline for the planning process to be done this year so that I can bring it to the Board of Trustees for review, input, and approval at their May meeting. As trustees of the university, it is the board's fiduciary responsibility to make sure the university remains mission-centered. So, there is an important and appropriate role for the board in this planning process.

This past fall, reflecting on our mission statement and the context of the university, I drafted a vision statement to the University Planning Team to set the planning process in motion. From the beginning, I have set our certain requirements for this plan. First the plan must be an *integrated* strategic plan. That is, the plan will have the important elements of academic and student affairs at the core of the plan, but it would also have a business plan and a facilities plan. In this way the vision and hopes of the substance of the plan could be something that we can execute and achieve. Second, I believed that the development of the plan would be an exercise in *shared governance* involving faculty, staff, students, administrators, and the board. I hoped then that the development of the plan is an opportunity for our committee structure to actually work and produce a plan that can be implemented.

In the vision document I said that in simplest terms, Loyola could be described as a medium-sized Jesuit and Catholic comprehensive university located in New Orleans, but there are strategic issues implicit in each of these descriptors.

In that vision exercise, I wrote that Loyola would remain Catholic and Jesuit. The first challenge for planning is to determine *how* best to be Catholic and Jesuit. The identity of the university needs to be ingrained in the curricular life of the university—in the Common Curriculum, for example—and the extracurricular life of the university. The two ought to be seamless and present our students with opportunities for continuous learning.

A second challenge for our planning, which I raised, is to determine—to choose—what the right size is for Loyola. Given our ideals of education, what is the right size for us in terms of undergraduate, graduate, and law students? What are the opportunities for us, as a university, in online and distance education? What are the opportunities for Loyola in graduate and professional education?

A third challenge that I highlighted was how to take advantage of our location. We live in an extraordinary place. This is a city that is rich in diversity and culture; a region that is crucial to the life of the nation with energy, transportation. This region is an environmental laboratory as the nation looks for ways to address environmental challenges. Furthermore we are in a city that is a living laboratory as its citizens work to rebuild every social system in the city: housing, businesses, health care, the arts, the business of culture, and government itself. Many of us, faculty and staff, and our students are actively engaged in the

renewal of the city. We can always ask how we can better bring out intellectual capital and expertise to be of service in helping our city solve some of its pressing social issues. The city and the region are an extraordinary laboratory for our teaching and research. The world truly is our blackboard.

Fourth, central to our planning must be the work of teaching and research. We are, fundamentally, a university. The quality and relevance of our academic programs must be at the heart of our planning. Loyola brings intellect and creativity to all of our engagements. And so we must constantly look for ways to strengthen and support the work of teaching, research, and learning.

The answer to these questions will shape a long-term plan for facilities, which must be part of a strategic plan. And, we must be sure that integrated to any strategic plan is a business plan so that we can achieve the goals we have set for ourselves.

Like most institutions of higher education, Loyola can be anything that it wants to be but we cannot be everything. And, in our contemporary world, where the term “education” has become an umbrella for all learning, the mission of a university defines the type of education and research that Loyola is committed to and become central to the planning of any university.

Every university is committed to academic excellence. But “academic excellence” needs to be specified. In his book, *The University in Ruins*, author Bill Readings argues that all universities seek to be known as *excellent*.¹ But, claiming excellence begs the fundamental question: *excellent about what?* With the explosion of knowledge there are many different views of what it is to be

“educated” and so too there are many different views about what an “excellent” university education is. This is a particularly difficult problem as families and students try to compare and evaluate colleges and universities and as different groups try to rank and compare them.

As a Jesuit, Catholic university Loyola has an identity rooted in a tradition of learning grounded in the liberal arts and sciences. And, our mission as Jesuit and Catholic is shaped by the context of where we are: New Orleans and the Gulf South. Our identity, as an American university in the Jesuit Catholic tradition, shapes our mission.² And our mission and identity shape the purpose of the education. It is to help our students grow and mature and to so transform our society.

We at Loyola, along with many other Jesuit colleges and universities, often use the term *magis* as part of our language. But what does it mean and how does it relate to us and what we are doing? Rooted in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola the *magis* is the restless dynamic that challenges us always to ask what more we can we do and how we can do it better. This dynamic is not only for individuals but it applies to institutions as well. We, as Loyola, should always be asking how we can improve and be better. And we have measures in our society such as the *U.S. News* survey or the survey by the Princeton Review. While we may, and should, have questions about such measures, they do provide a way to compare universities and colleges. And they are one way for us to ask the ongoing question of the *magis*: How can we do it better?

This tradition of education that we live in, and live out, is also student centered. We often describe this quality as *cura personalis*. The term comes from the Latin phrase, which translates as *care of the person*. Originally it was used to describe the responsibility of the Jesuit Superior to care for each member of the community with his unique gifts, challenges, needs and possibilities.

This commitment to being centered on the person with her talents and abilities is now applied more broadly to include the relationship between educators and students and professional relationships among all those who work in the university. *Cura personalis* suggests individualized attention to the needs of the other, a respect for a person's unique circumstances and concerns, and an appropriate appreciation for his or her particular gifts and insights.

This attention to students is a value for any university that identifies as Jesuit. But, I think there is a special challenge for us in our education, inside and outside the classroom, for all of our students. It ought to inform the way we teach, the importance of advising, counseling, and all that we do outside the classroom. If the world is our blackboard, no opportunity for learning should be lost and no opportunity to help students learn should be overlooked.

On many occasions I have pointed out that we have a large percentage of our undergraduate students who are the first in their family to attend a college or university. This is marvelous. Every study done has shown that when the first member of a family graduates from college it changes not only the person but changes the future of the family. According to the Higher Education Research Institute, 15.9 percent of the nation's undergraduates are first-generation students.

At most public universities 17.7 percent are first-generation students. At most private institutions 12.8 percent are first-generation students.³ At Loyola, 30 percent of our undergrads are the first in their families to attend college. This means that we are almost twice the national average for enrolling these students and we are more than double the average of first generation students for private universities. This reality presents challenges for us to meet the needs of these students. I have asked the provost and the planning team to include in our planning. We need to be sure that we are meeting the needs of these students. We want them not merely to attend Loyola but to graduate. In the spirit of the *magis*, we seek to continually improve. We will improve our retention rates and our graduation rates. And, our first generation students are a special population that needs our attention.

When students and families make the commitment, and the financial sacrifice to attend Loyola, we have an obligation to do all that we can so that they will commence from Loyola successfully. And, in the spirit of the *magis*, which drives us to seek continual improvement, we need to constantly review what we are doing and ask how we can make it better.

Today, as we have begun a new semester, we remember and celebrate the past and all that we have accomplished. We have much to celebrate as a university. What we collectively celebrate is based on the hard work and dedication of members of our faculty and staff. We celebrate years of service of those who have served Loyola for twenty-five years. We celebrate dedication to teaching and research. We celebrate the promise of future research and

innovation. We celebrate the bright minds and hard work of our students and the generosity of our benefactors. In a few moments we will gather in the Monroe Library to celebrate the new semester and the achievement and work of our colleagues. But we also celebrate the 10th anniversary of the library. We all know how important the library is to the life of this university and I want to thank Fr. Jim Carter, S.J., president emeritus, for his leadership in creating the building. And I want to state very clearly that we not only celebrate a building and a facility, we celebrate the library staff, particularly the leadership of Dean Mary Lee Sweat, who make the facility one of the top ten libraries in the nation. In many ways they are iconic for all of us as they embody a culture committed to learning, to continual improvement, and to the needs of faculty and students.

While you are there, I invite you to visit the new Faculty Development Center, opening this spring, in room 334. We are pleased that we have established this center to support faculty teaching and research and hope that you will stop by and use the center. The center, I hope, will help us live out the *magis* as we seek to continually do better what we do in our teaching and research.

This week we celebrated, as a nation, new leadership. Our new President has challenged us to live with the audacity of hope. Hope is not wishful thinking about the future. Rather it is a virtue to be practiced that bridges past and future. As the theologian Jurgen Moltmann points our hope is grounded in what we have experienced in the past. We trust people and believe the promises they make because they have kept their promises in the past and so we live in hope that they will fulfill their promises in the future. President Obama, facing significant

international economic issues as well as two wars abroad has challenged Americans to rise to the occasion based on what the nation has done before and the promise it holds for the future.

We on the Gulf Coast, and in New Orleans, understand that to live in hope one must dream boldly, and then work, very hard, to make those dreams come true. Our strategic planning is an exercise undertaken in hope. For, as Kierkegaard wrote: “Hope is passion for what is possible” and we are committed to the hard work of making the possible, our dreams, real.

Thank you for what you have done. Thank you for all that you will do.

¹ Bill Readings, The University in Ruins, See Chapter 2, “In Idea of Excellence”, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997)

² See Loyola Mission and Identity Statement,
<http://www.loyno.edu/jesuitcenter/LoyolaMissionIdentityStatement.html>

³ Victor Saenz, S. Hurtado, D. Barrea, et al., First in My Family: A Profile of First Generation College Students at Four Year Institutions since 1971, Higher Education Research Institute, (Los Angeles: UCLA Press, 2007).