Faculty Convocation Remarks 2016

Philip Moremen

President Esteban, Provost Robinson, Members of the Board of Trustees, Members of the Board of Regents, Distinguished Guests, and Faculty Colleagues:

On behalf of the Faculty Senate, I'd like to welcome new colleagues, congratulate our newly tenured and promoted faculty, and thank retired and retiring faculty for their years of service to Seton Hall. I also want to thank faculty who serve now or who have served on the Senate, and in particular those who give so much of their time on its committees, who do most of its work.

We begin this academic year with a freshman class that's academically stronger than ever, and a new Medical School moving forward at a new site that will also eventually become home to the College of Nursing and the School of Health and Medical Sciences. The University is in an excellent position, poised to take advantage of exciting new opportunities and meet the challenges facing higher education in the next ten plus years.

Before I begin my main remarks I'd like to highlight a few of the initiatives the Senate will be working on this year.

- The Senate's Compensation and Welfare committee will continue its efforts regarding parental leave policies for faculty;
- The Senate and its Faculty Guide Committee are working on revisions to the Guide, to make it more readily comprehensible and to bring it up to date;
- We'll continue to discuss with the Provost's Office the need for probationary faculty to have some measure of confidence in the expectation of contract renewal when they're successfully working towards tenure;
- The Senate will continue to work on issues related to compensation and faculty welfare:
- The Senate plans to increase its engagement in University-wide discussions regarding educational technology and innovation in education.

We look forward to working closely with the Provost and making progress in these and other areas.

I want to focus my remarks today on the challenges facing higher education, the necessity for innovation in teaching to face them, and the role of faculty in leading that innovation. Several developments in the last ten years or so have put great pressure on the traditional model of higher education, that is, the model of the four-year degree program, consisting of majors and minors and courses delivered primarily face-to-face in brick and mortar classrooms. The first challenge is demographic, consisting of a decline in the number of college-age students. The second is economic: the Great Recession and its wake have decreased the ability and willingness of student families to pay increasing levels of tuition and have constricted college budgets. A third challenge is technological, with the development of online alternatives to the traditional classroom and other technologies that can enhance learning. A final challenge, deriving from the other three, is the potential for the "unbundling" of the educational experience, resulting in the

ability of students to take classes in various formats—online, traditional, hybrid— and from a variety of providers, perhaps at a lower cost than in the traditional format.

Before I talk about these challenges in a little more depth, I should point out that I don't think the sky is falling on the traditional model of higher education just yet. My hope, in fact, is that the sky will stay mostly where it's supposed to for at least another 10 or 15 years, until I retire. I freely admit to a reluctance to put a toe into the online teaching waters. I also admit to skepticism, both for pedagogical and idealistic reasons, about the value of this Brave New technological World. But leaving these qualms aside for the moment, I believe we have to face the challenges I've described, challenges that will continue to result in greater competition among colleges, and between colleges and other education providers, for students and for revenue. This competition will inevitably increase pressure for change and innovation in the way faculty and colleges teach and provide their educational services. We have some time to adapt—let's use that time wisely.

Let me say just a little more about the challenges that we face, at the risk of going over familiar ground for some of you. In terms of demographic change, we've experienced a trough in the number of high school graduates. Those numbers peaked in 2010-2011 at 3.4 million, the largest graduating class in U.S. history.[1] That number was projected to fall until last year before rising again, but only slowly, until 2023-2024.[2] This decline is even more pronounced in the Northeast because of overall population shifts to the South and West in the last 25 years or so.[3] That means the same number of colleges and universities are chasing fewer students, making it more difficult to attract adequate numbers of students and better students.

As for economic challenges, we're familiar from our own experience with the shocks caused by the Great Recession, which are still being felt—or at least remembered—by many families across the country. In addition, we've all heard about the "crisis" of student debt. Together, these developments have made students and families more price-sensitive than ever about a college education, given to shopping around and willing to settle for a less prestigious, but cheaper, college experience. These families are concerned about value and about return on investment, focused on job and career prospects like never before.

Indeed, there is a sense in which higher education is now viewed as a commodity. This is a characterization that we as faculty resist because we think that quality colleges and universities, and Seton Hall in particular, offer distinct educational advantages. Our Catholic mission, our growing reputation, our history, and our commitment to teaching, all are among the characteristics that set Seton Hall apart. Nonetheless, the perception of college education as a commodity contains more than a grain of truth.[4] From the perspective of students and their families, colleges as a group seem to offer generally the same or similar academic programs and courses described in similar ways; even the marketing materials may all begin to sound the same to the student doing the college tour. When it's hard to distinguish among products, they become commodities, and price becomes the chief differentiator. And this is what we see in much of the

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[1] Jon McGee, Breakpoint: The Changing Marketplace for Higher Education 23 (2015).

[2] Id. at 23-24.

[3] Id. at 28-30.

[4] Jeffrey Selingo, College (Un)bound: The Future of Higher Education and What it Means for Students 67-69 (2013).

market for higher education: institutions competing for students on price, by increasing aid and raising their discount rates. Seton Hall is not immune from this price competition, though we are doing better than many other institutions.

Into this perfect storm of competitive pressure, technological change, in the form of online education and other technology that can enhance the classroom learning environment, has provided perhaps the biggest potential "disruption" to the traditional model. The term "disruption" was coined by a Harvard Business School Professor to describe the impact of innovation—often, driven by technological change—on traditional industries, including higher education.[5] A disruptive innovation is not necessarily the best product or service, but is less expensive, easier to use, more accessible, and good enough.[6] Classic examples include the effect of the internet on traditional newspapers and the disruption of the publishing and music industries by digital technology.

Online education and other technologies have the potential to be just such a disruptor of higher education. To be sure, online education can provide economic benefits to colleges and universities: online courses can increase students and revenue by expanding the market of students and driving down the cost per student. But a burgeoning market for online education also creates competitive pressures, especially to the extent that higher education is seen as a commodity. Competition in online education is growing and the online share of the higher education market is likely to increase, especially as it attracts cost-sensitive students and students interested in flexibility of scheduling—working students seeking a graduate degree, for example.

The development of online technology has given rise to the idea that the traditional college experience will become "unbundled."[7] The idea of "unbundling" is that companies and other outside organizations can offer slices of the functions and services provided by colleges and universities, potentially at lower cost. For a prosaic example, think of the management of food service and residence halls.

Even teaching can be unbundled through the application of technology. Online education not only increases flexibility of scheduling, but also allows students to study at their own pace. With individualized pacing, the traditional semester format is no longer the default length of all classes and four years is no longer the default length for an undergraduate education. And students might mix courses not just within the same University, but also among different providers, some of them free or lower-cost providers. A student might have the option, for example, to take an online introductory MOOC—Massively Open Online Course— from a private company, a hybrid course from, say, a community college, and a traditional course from a four-year university.

Colleges and universities still "have a corner on the credential market"[8]—i.e., the degree. They decide what courses and experiences count for that degree. And there's still a consensus in

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[5] See Clayton M. Christensen and Henry J. Eyring, The Innovative University: Changing the DNA of Higher Education from the Inside Out (2011), cited in McGee, at 78.

[6] McGee, at 78.

[7] Selingo, at 68

[8] Selingo, at 68.

society and among employers that a Bachelor's degree is the essential credential for good jobs. But what if other entities could provide credentials to verify learning outcomes, credentials that might become acceptable to employers? This is already happening to some extent. For example, Udacity, one of the early private developers of online courses, is offering what it calls "Nanodegree programs:" credentials offered for developing skills for tech jobs through online learning that may be acceptable alternatives to a Baccalaureate degree.[9]

Thus, the competitive pressures on the traditional model are clear, highlighting the necessity for innovation in higher education, including at Seton Hall. We must think about "reconfiguring the Academy," in the words of a colleague. Seton Hall has already developed significant online programs and courses, and that trend is accelerating. One development that could increase the tempo of online education here is the intellectual property policy on teaching work product agreed to by the Senate and the Administration last year. That policy provides for compensation to faculty for developing online courses and an ownership interest in those courses, providing an incentive to participate in the development of online education.

Our University has also, broadly speaking, explored innovation through various mechanisms, including the Teaching, Learning, and Technology Roundtable (TLTR) and the TLTC. Our Digital Humanities effort, driven primarily by faculty, applies new technologies to the humanities and applies traditional humanities-oriented questions to emerging technologies. I know there are other efforts out there, and apologize for not mentioning all of them.

But how will we handle further innovation in learning, involving technology or otherwise, in a strategic way? Georgetown has developed a sort of academic "skunk works," led by faculty, to explore innovation in undergraduate education, called the Red House, after the building in which it's housed.[10] That experience provides some potentially useful and cautionary lessons for us. The Red House has been focused on innovative teaching projects, some of them concerned with "rebundling," linking informal and extracurricular activities on campus to courses and other academic pursuits in an effort to keep the traditional model relevant. Innovations have included project-based minors that depend on students to develop the curricula; the use of educational "badges" (a sort of certificate) to recognize untraditional student skills—I understand TLTC is looking into the idea of badges here. Other proposals from the Red House include an innovation called "studios," in which students work with faculty to continue projects begun in class the previous semester and a four-year combined Master's and Bachelor's degree.

The Red House projects, however, have sometimes been controversial among faculty and have generated unease about the speed at which they appeared to be moving forward without broad faculty oversight. As a result, Georgetown's provost recognized in retrospect that the failure to create a coordinated governance structure for the Red House was "stupid of us" and the senate established a university-wide committee to vet Red House projects before they get too far along.

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[9] Nanodegree Programs, Udacity.com, https://www.udacity.com/nanodegree
[10] Goldie Blumenstyk, From a Red House Off Campus, Georgetown Tries to Reinvent Itself, The Chronicle of Higher Education, Jan. 19, 2016, http://www.chronicle.com/article/From-a-Red-House-Off-Campus/234958?cid=rclink

I believe that such a "skunk works" could be appropriate for Seton Hall. There's a lot to be said for an organized, focused, collective effort at innovation broadly speaking, led by faculty, to enhance and complement existing efforts by individual faculty and by other initiatives. I'm suggesting, therefore, exploring a joint effort with the Provost's Office to develop and fund an expanded University-wide, faculty-led effort dedicated to incubating innovative ideas.

But whatever the focus for our efforts to support innovation, I'm also suggesting that the faculty as a body needs to be involved, for two reasons. First, we're going through an incredible time of flux in higher education, in which those institutions that adapt, and adapt well, will come out ahead. We face an imperative to explore and consider new ways to deliver on our core educational mission, to say nothing of our obligation to improve the learning outcomes of our students. If we don't make the change, change may be forced upon us. As my friend Jack Shannon says, you can drive the bus, you can ride the bus, or you can be roadkill. I think I'd prefer to be in the driver's seat.

Second, the faculty and the Senate should be involved in planning and policy-making for innovation, as well as oversight of innovation efforts, as a matter of shared governance. To survive and prosper, innovation initiatives will need the support and backing of the faculty at large. If the experiment of the Red House tells us anything, it's that a broad-based faculty involvement from initial stages is crucial to success. One small initiative the Senate Executive Committee is pursuing along these lines is to enhance the role of its Technology committee to focus on issues of policy related to online education and to make that committee the contact point between the Administration and the Senate on those issues.

The Senate, and the faculty, should be thinking proactively of ways to engage the pace of change. As faculty, we're the educational life-blood of the University—we're primarily responsible for designing and implementing a Seton Hall education. And we're here for the long haul—30 plus years in many cases. Even when we leave, we bequeath what we've created to our younger colleagues. We should be thinking about the long-term curricular future of the University and we should participate in shaping the University's destiny and our own destiny as faculty and as educators.

Convocation is always an exciting and hopeful occasion. Let's build on this auspicious beginning to the year. Thank you.