General Faculty Meeting

23 January 2019

Title: Partnering to Advance the Excellence of SMU: An Update on “Continuing the Ascent”
Ladies and gentlemen, this is an historic SMU faculty meeting.

Perhaps for the first time in SMU’s history, we have representatives of the University’s administrative leadership, the President and Provost, the Faculty Senate, and the Board of Trustees before you today conveying our joint commitment to advancing the excellence of SMU. Together with the Deans, and each of you present today, we are working in concert to make SMU a stronger university.

What’s innovative today is Bob Dedman’s presence and his remarks to you. Having Bob with us to share his perspective is emblematic of the increasing depth of shared hopes for the future of the University.

We benefit from a tradition at SMU of appropriate separation of the fiduciary oversight of the University, which is fulfilled by the Board, and strategic and implementation responsibilities, which are fulfilled by the administration.

The stewardship by the administration, the President, the Provost, and the members of the President’s Executive Council, and the deans, is carried out in a spirit of shared governance and partnership with the Faculty Senate as well as the faculty and staff of the University.

Speaking of the deans, let me pause briefly to acknowledge Holly Jeffcoat, our newest dean, who came to SMU in autumn 2018. Holly is Dean of SMU Libraries. This is her first General Faculty Meeting. Holly, we are thrilled to have you at SMU and are grateful for the contributions you are already making on campus.

My focus today will be to update you on how the University’s network of partnerships is advancing progress toward achieving the 14 recommendations articulated in Continuing the Ascent: Recommendations for Enhancing the Academic Quality and Stature of Southern Methodist University.
I’ll spend a few minutes reviewing some of the key steps along the way that led to *Continuing the Ascent*’s release in spring 2018.

Having commemorated the centennial of the opening of SMU in 2015, the University’s leadership turned its attention to SMU’s second century.

Those deliberations resulted in the University’s strategic plan entitled, “Launch* SMU’s Second Century, Shaping Leaders for a Changing World, 2016-2025 Strategic Plan,” which was unanimously approved by the Board of Trustees in December of 2015.

“Partnership” is an underlying theme of my remarks today. I believe strongly that, for SMU to achieve the ambitious suite of academic goals we have established, we will require strong collaboration all the university’s stakeholders.

So, in partnership with the deans, the Associate Provosts in my office, the Faculty Senate, and a broad range of faculty, we began the process toward building on the “Second Century” plan by developing *Continuing the Ascent*’s 14 recommendations – most notably through the creation of multiple task forces. During 2017-2018, these task forces delivered their reports.
At the invitation of Faculty Senate President, Professor Paul Krueger, I made a presentation before the Senate to address questions and to receive their ideas and suggestions. I also held additional discussions with the Executive Committee of the Faculty Senate. The Senate’s Student Policies Committee, the Committee on Research and Graduate Education, and ad hoc committees on data science and the East Campus also provided written responses to the draft *Continuing the Ascent* document.

Also, in partnership with SMU Trustee Kelly Compton, Chair of the Academic Affairs Committee of the SMU Board of Trustees, numerous discussions were held with SMU’s Board members to receive their thoughts and perspectives.

To provide a brief summary of my presentation, we have already reached several important milestones and have also made significant progress toward achieving others since *Continuing the Ascent*’s release. We have:

- Developed a comprehensive plan to improve student success and retention
- Proposed a new “common curriculum” ready for consideration by SMU’s Board of Trustees
- Obtained support from Deans on seeking philanthropic funding for a Data Science Institute
- Prepared for the launch of an innovation seed fund with request for proposals distributed this semester
- Received task force report on the possible formation of a Graduate School to be distributed this semester
- Announced SMU’s new strategic partnerships
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• Announced SMU’s new strategic partnerships

In *Continuing the Ascent*, we presented as a unifying framework to structure and organize our recommendations a framework that we call the “Architecture of Academic Quality.”

*The Architecture of Academic Quality*

Premier universities excel through a demonstrated commitment to academic quality across these academic functions:

- Quality of undergraduate students and their educational experience
- Faculty, research, and creative impact
- Academic reputation
- Quality of graduate students and their educational experience
- Strategic partnerships

When we refer to becoming a premier research and teaching university with global impact, we mean that SMU will be recognized regionally, nationally, and globally for:

• The quality of undergraduate students and their educational experience

• Faculty, research, and creative impact
• The quality of graduate students and their educational experience
• A commitment to strategic partnerships that promote societal engagement, service, and acting as an engine of regional economic development

Premier universities excel through a demonstrated commitment to academic quality across all these academic functions which, in turn, drives academic reputation.
Among *Continuing the Ascent’s* recommendations was the idea of developing a more unified and coherent support system for the retention and graduation of SMU’s undergraduates by creating an Office of Student Success and Retention.

During this past year, Sheri Kunovich was appointed as Associate Provost for Student Academic Engagement and Success to lead these efforts. Sheri spent her first semester in the office reviewing services and developing a plan in line with the university’s goals for student engagement and success. Further conversations will take place during spring 2019 to confirm alignment prior to the plan’s implementation.

Sheri was formerly the Chair of the Department of Sociology in Dedman College. She is with us today and would be pleased to discuss your ideas for student success.

The 2016-2025 Strategic Plan and *Continuing the Ascent* articulate the university’s goals – and current rates – in the area of student success and retention, as defined by first-to-second year retention rates, four-year, and six-year graduation rates.
Our efforts in favor of student success are being pursued, of course, while also strengthening our dedication to the diversity of the student body and a campus culture of inclusion through our innovative Cultural Intelligence initiative led by Senior Advisor to the Provost and Professor Maria Dixon Hall.

One significant aspect of Continuing the Ascent’s recommendations involves enhancing the quality of our undergraduates and their educational experience through a vigorous review of the university’s general education curriculum.

For the past 50 years, SMU has worked hard to develop and maintain a progressive curriculum. As you can see on this slide, SMU’s 1963 Master Plan articulated an educational philosophy that is distinctively SMU’s and has persisted throughout the various curricular iterations. According to the Master Plan, SMU’s educational philosophy “is that professional studies must rise from the solid foundation of a basic liberal education. . . .”
We have improved our curriculum in the context of fascinating, and somewhat troubling, societal forces and technological advances that are threatening to constrain human choice.

Although SMU has been appropriately progressive in launching new programs in data science, analytics, and artificial intelligence, the rise of machine learning, algorithms, and predictive analytics demands that we also provide a curriculum that aims to equip SMU graduates with the ability to make reasoned judgments and decisions despite societal forces and technologies that may constrain choice.

Take for example the comments from this article in Fast Company magazine from earlier this month. The title of the article is “Nine Innovations That Are Creeping Us Out in 2019.” Among them are facial recognition software for monitoring our travels, genetic abuse such as engineering of human embryos, digital fakes of humans and news documents, and home surveillance. Here are two quotes about the possible erosion of “free will” and changes in societal roles, many of which have legal implications.
I recently read an interesting book by Franklin Foer entitled, World Without Mind. His thesis is that the profit motives of large companies such as Facebook, Google, and Amazon are limiting the range of options we are exposed to in our social lives, in the news we read, and in our purchase behavior.

Foer’s book reminds us how important it is for our SMU curriculum to emphasize the development of reasoned judgment and choice by our graduates.
Here is another book that I read recently entitled, *The Fuzzy and the Techie: Why the Liberal Arts Will Rule the Digital World*. Copies will be available at the conclusion of my remarks. In a break with tradition, however, I wanted to highlight the book at the midpoint- not just at the end – of my presentation. This is not because Dean DiPiero has offered me a compelling bribe. Instead, it’s because this book has much to say about the convergence of the humanities and digital world and, in turn, can further guide our thinking concerning the implementation of the University’s Common Curriculum.

In short, we believe that we have proposed a progressive and innovative new curriculum that positions our graduates for success in their careers and personal lives for decades to come.

In terms of next steps, we are engaging members of SMU’s Board of Trustees, most notably members of the Committee on Academic Affairs, to provide them with the details and information they will need as they review the new Common Curriculum, which we anticipate submitting for their possible vote of approval in February 2019.
Another way for SMU to further strengthen its academic quality and stature is to improve policies and procedures for recruiting, developing, retaining, and rewarding excellent faculty members and to bolster SMU’s research and creative agenda through interdisciplinary initiatives.

One initiative I would like to emphasize today is a proposal from the Task Force on Data Science to create a Data Science Institute at SMU. Based on the task force’s recommendations, a Data Science Institute would be charged to facilitate interdisciplinary programs in data science, collaborate with other institutes and centers on campus, expand research funding, and develop educational and research linkages with regional organizations.

This past autumn, we made good progress through deliberations with the Provost Office team and the Council of Deans. I have asked Dean Quick to develop a more detailed prospectus to address the Data Science Institute’s role, scope, and requirements. I plan to share this information with you later this spring.
Next, I wish to share what I hope will be an exciting update on *Continuing the Ascent*’s recommendation to create an innovation seed fund for bold ideas in research and creative activity to elevate SMU’s intellectual footprint and to attract sustainable philanthropic or grant revenue.

Through the budget process, and largely through the use of savings from OE2C, we have set aside $2,000,000 as an initial pool of funding for the seed fund. You can expect to receive additional information later this spring, and we expect to begin investing in our first range of bold ideas during the 2019-2020 academic year.
The quality of SMU’s graduate students in research degree programs and professional degree programs, in terms of their selectivity and standardized test scores, grades, publications, and other creative outputs, is also vital for enhancing the overall academic excellence of SMU.

Graduate students’ quality has both internal benefits – high quality graduate students provide greater experiences for our undergraduates (e.g., in laboratories, classrooms, mentorship) – and external benefits – high quality graduate students increase our ability to place SMU Ph.D.’s into faculty positions at world-class universities around the nation and the world.

Last autumn, I asked Dean Quick to assemble a representative body of faculty members to develop the proposal for a Graduate School that will guide our thinking in terms of the school’s scope, staffing, and resources. The Task Force, delivered their report to my office on December 18th. Reviews and discussions are ongoing at the senior leadership level regarding a staged implementation of a graduate school at SMU.
The more vibrant the intellectual and academic ecosystem in North Texas, the more SMU’s academic programs are elevated through shared research and artistic collaborations, cooperative grant proposals to federal and state agencies, joint degree programs, and employment opportunities for SMU graduates. The final quadrant in our “Architecture of Academic Quality” contains recommendations for deepening the university’s innovative strategic partnerships.

There is no shortage of examples of innovative strategic regional partnerships at SMU. I will quickly highlight a few examples that demonstrate recent success.
On September 7th, we announced our partnership with Dallas Independent School District and Toyota to create a new and innovative Pre-K to 8th grade STEM school in West Dallas. The aim is to inspire and prepare students for the next generation of STEM jobs through a curriculum that is project-based and business-aligned.

Toyota USA Foundation granted $2 million to the Simmons School of Education and Human Development to develop curriculum, provide professional development for teachers, and coordinate with nonprofits operating in the area. The school will begin a phased opening with Pre-K to 1st grade and 7th to 8th grade students in fall 2020.

Thanks to Dean Knight for her leadership on this partnership.

In August, SMU announced the merger of the Meadows School’s National Center for Arts Research with DataArts, a respected resource for in-depth data about nonprofit arts, culture and humanities organizations throughout the U.S.

This is an additional major investment in big data and research for SMU. The newly named SMU DataArts organization will integrate the combined strengths and capabilities of both groups, with a mission to empower arts and cultural
leaders with high-quality data and evidence-based resources and insights to help them overcome challenges and increase their impact.

Thanks to Dean Holland for his leadership on this initiative.

The Bush Institute-SMU Economic Growth Initiative was launched last summer. This initiative involves the Cox School’s Department of Economics and the Bush Institute in close collaboration on economic policies.
So now, let me provide a brief summary of the current academic year’s financial investments in academic programming. Here is a table that shows where we made those investments.

We are currently in the process of annual budget deliberations where we will continue to dedicate new funds to enhancing the academic quality and status of SMU.

My team is actively monitoring the tasks and activities that will be required to accomplish the recommendations in Continuing the Ascent. We have developed a detailed Gantt chart to track them. A copy of this tool is available on the Provost’s website, and I invite any of you with an interest to access and review it.

And now, to conclude, I invite you to come forward and take a copy of The Fuzzy and the Techie.
Thank you for your attendance today, and thank you, as always for your partnership in the quest to advance our university.