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## State of the University Address 2016

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Office of the President

*Mary B. Marcy*

**State of the University Address  
August 16, 2016**

Good morning, and welcome to the start of the 2016-2017 academic year at Dominican! Welcome to the beginning of another chapter in the 126-year history of a remarkable institution. A special welcome to our new faculty and staff, and a special thanks to the stewards of our university, members of the Board of Trustees, who are represented today by Sr. Maureen McInerney and Sr. Raya Hanlon.

Much has happened, both on campus and off campus, since we gathered at commencement last May. On campus we have had a very productive and encouraging summer. Dominican held the first of two national convening's to engage college students with the presidential debate process, with a well received program and more to come. We had a successful first summer in our partnership with Johns Hopkins' Center for Talented Youth. And the numbers in our entering class, from undergraduate through transfer and graduate programs, are trending well ahead of last year.

Life on Dominican's campus stands in stark contrast to the external climate. In the world beyond our campus, it is a turbulent, anxiety producing time. Despite calls for understanding, we have seen conflicts about race, religion, and security escalate, sometimes into violence. We have watched contentious exchanges and atrocities, verbal and physical, domestic and international. And we have struggled to make sense of the cruelty and anger in the world.

It has been a summer of anxiety beyond campus, and promise on campus. In the midst of these contrasts, it is tempting to retreat to what feels safe, to turn away from the painful, raucous external environment. It is tempting, even internally, to focus only on the familiar, and ignore the challenges we know we still face. It is tempting to avoid things that make us uncomfortable, because those things can also make us feel vulnerable.

To be sure, there are things we cannot control. But we are most vulnerable when we are ignorant – and we are not in the business of ignorance. With knowledge and clarity, we can – we are – making a difference in our own future, and in the larger environment. In fact, I would argue that the broader context, from violent acts to uncivil dialogue, only increases our responsibility to nurture a community that embodies Dominican values.

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Early in my tenure at Dominican, I quoted the late paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould. Gould suggested that acts of destruction, acts of violence, acts of hatred are shocking, but it is important to recognize they are embraced by only a few. And such acts, he argued, cannot be answered in one stroke, but through thousands of small works of creativity. He called this the Great Asymmetry, the realization that isolated works of cruelty are perpetrated by a few, and are healed by the many, through diverse voices and multiple acts of intelligence and compassion.

If Gould was right, then it is incumbent on the many to play their part. If Gould was right, then our work to build community, to develop the best in our students, to support each other, is not separate from the world, it is essential to the world. In education, we have more opportunity, more ability, more capacity to make a positive difference in the lives of others' than in nearly any profession. We don't educate because it is the latest, greatest app and it is cool – although it can be very cool to find a new inroad to addressing breast cancer or to discover new depths in Shakespeare. We don't educate because it is necessary for employment, although it is. We educate because the human capacity to reason, to aspire, to empathize, and ultimately to influence the world for the better, deserves our greatest effort.

With Gould's entreaty as backdrop, we can consider the state of the university with clarity, and move forward with renewed energy drawn from a shared sense of purpose, and building on tangible progress.

I have been privileged to lead Dominican for five years. Just as the broader context has changed during that time, so too has the national environment for small colleges. The challenges of enrollment, the stress on our financial model, the importance of integrating the liberal arts and the professions, and a changing student demographic have all shifted significantly, even in my relatively short time at Dominican. And I have been reminded that meaningful progress also takes time. In my first year we secured a wonderful gift from Rolf Lewis and Valerie Hetherington. It was only last year that gift's vision was realized and Meadowlands opened as a health sciences center. In the last few years we have envisioned new programs. They are finally coming on-line. That is the nature of progress at a university.

As I was when I began five years ago, I remain energized and excited about the future for this institution – because of the progress we have made to date, because there is a core commitment to students that has never wavered, and because we have created an innovative climate that is producing positive results.

Let me be more specific about those results. One of the areas in which we have focused over the last few years has been student retention and persistence. To improve retention, we have implemented the initial stages of the Dominican Experience, revised our financial aid policies, developed and expanded the TORCH leadership program, committed to strengthening academic quality, and secured new scholarship funds. The results are stunning. In the last five years we have seen a dramatic change in student

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retention and persistence. Since 2011, our 4-year graduation rate improved from 34% to 52%; our 5-year graduation rate improved from 47% to 70%; and our 6-year graduation rate improved from 49% to 71%. This is extraordinary progress by any measure. We have also focused on support for students as they manage the college transition. This summer, the advising team worked closely with admissions and student life to support new students and respond to returning students. Their combined efforts have made a measurable difference. Our enrollment numbers are well ahead of last year, and on budget for this year.

This progress is encouraging. So is the manner in which we have faced challenges together. The last academic year is a case in point. We had a very lean budget, the most difficult since I have arrived at Dominican. We implemented Workday and negotiated our first Service Employees International contract in the same year, which placed extraordinary demands on all of us, particularly our dedicated staff. And we worked in a national climate that is increasingly difficult for small colleges, and increasingly divisive in its rhetoric.

I kept thinking about the phrase the Federal Reserve used in the wake of the Great Recession – stress testing. We had some stress tests last year. The good news is, we met the challenges and we passed every stress, in most cases with high marks. So while it was in some ways a difficult year, it was also a very affirming one. Dominican reached an agreement on our first SEIU contract faster than any institution in the country. Of course there were moments of tension and frustration; this is our first union contract, and we're still learning. But there was also a conclusion that honored the work of our adjunct faculty, held tightly to our shared community, and established an encouraging template for our future work together.

After amazing effort by staff across campus, Workday is now in place and can provide an easier, more effective way to manage so that we can do more of what we value – supporting each other our students. And the campus responded to the budget problems with care and integrity. We protected our central mission while making necessary reductions to ensure sustainability.

Beyond these issues, we made substantial progress advancing our strategic priorities. I recently learned quote that captures what we are creating at Dominican. Mark Twain once said “the two most important days of your life are day you were born, and day you find out why.” Dominican is a second day institution. We provide this opportunity through a common student experience, The Dominican Experience. The Dominican Experience is our commitment to a liberal education, one which integrates the professions and the liberal arts. It develops the complex skills necessary for students to succeed, both because of, and regardless of, their chosen discipline.

The Dominican Experience is now a reality for Dominican students, and it is evolving at a rapid rate. Remember that we began with a deceptively simple notion in the Strategic Plan to ensure that all students graduate with engaged learning experiences. We then dove into research on best practices at other campuses, identified our own strengths, and began to build the program.

The four frames of the Dominican Experience – integrative advising, signature work, community engagement, and learning portfolios – have all begun. Every student who enters Dominican this fall has a peer mentor, and the integrative advising program will begin this year. The Dominican Scholarly and Creative Works conference continues to grow, and Dominican Scholar, our repository of student and faculty research has had over 100,000 downloads from around the world. International experiences, from study abroad to the international practicum, are expanding. Our service-learning program is strengthening, and our reputation for civic engagement is growing. This semester, we will use support from the Mellon Foundation to address the question of Democracy and Equity in over 50 classes. We will build on the lessons from the College of Education to create learning portfolios for all entering students. We will expand our student mentoring program. And this fall we will announce another major gift, one that will support the renovation of the library and provide program support for the Center for University Partnerships and Community Engagement.

And we are just getting started. Next month we will have a unique opportunity to elevate the community engagement aspect of the Dominican Experience. As you know, Dominican was selected as a voter education partner by the U.S. Commission on Presidential Debates. Eleven national higher education organizations have joined our initiative, and we will host the first national town hall designed to ensure student voices are part of the presidential elections. We will bring student delegates from colleges and universities across the nation to our campus. They will identify the top issues for Millennials in this year's elections, and their voices will be included in the national debates.

What connects the student delegates is not agreement on the issues, they have plenty of disagreement, just as the American public does. What binds them is their belief in American democracy, and their willingness to go through the crucible to ensure that it continues. And Dominican is the stage for their work.

The Dominican Experience is the cornerstone of every student's journey at Dominican. Tied directly to that experience is academic excellence across schools, programs, and disciplines. Last year, we passed some important milestones in building the quality of the academic program. By revising the honors program curriculum we can now promise more challenge, coherence, and connection for students. This revision has already increased the honors program enrollment this fall. The creation of common Institutional Learning Outcomes allows us to honor our shared aspirations as we craft individual courses and programs.

We also saw notable progress at the program level. Our Nursing students realized a significant increase in their professional NCLEX test pass rates, indicating that their education at Dominican is fully preparing them for their work beyond Dominican. We moved another significant step closer to accreditation for the Barowsky School. The innovative work our education program is developing through their iPad initiative is gaining national recognition, most recently identified in *Education Week* as one of five education schools in the country making a difference. We learned from a powerful, interdisciplinary sustainability colloquium. And we continued to receive accolades, internships, grants, and strong demand for programs such as Occupational Therapy, Dance, Political Science, Communications, and Biology.

These successes are encouraging. And we need to build on this progress. To strengthen enrollment, we must also continue to diversify our programs. We can do this most effectively by building on our own institutional strengths, focusing on market demand, and maintaining fidelity to our mission. Thanks to the leadership of academic affairs, the deans and your creative ideas, we now have 14 new programs just beginning or preparing to launch in the next few years. Some, like the Community Action and Social Change minor and the partnership with Hebei, China, are starting this fall. Others, like the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, embrace new structures to capitalize on institutional strengths. Still others, such as the Physician's Assistant program and the Health Care Leadership program, are in development and are already showing strong interest from prospective students.

My leadership team is crafting a strategy to nurture the most promising of these programs. We are evaluating what resources are needed to start the programs with quality, how they are aligned with our mission, what market we expect to reach, and what support you need to make them successful. There is no single answer to challenges of enrollment and sustainability. Instead, it is this dynamic mix of new programs and enduring strengths that are seeding our success.

The combination of the Dominican Experience, strengthening of the academic core, and the initiation of new programs promise a hopeful future. We must also make visible the distinctiveness of this education. I am happy to report that this fall we are initiating a more focused, authentic, and aggressive marketing effort.

Dominican has been the beneficiary of some very generous gifts in recent years, many to support new initiatives. One new gift is funding a comprehensive marketing effort. We have engaged Zehno, a leading educational communications and marketing firm, to capture and elevate the Dominican brand. They will be on campus this fall, and will work closely with our admissions, advancement, and marketing teams. We also want them to hear from all of you, to understand your work so that it can be presented in an authentic and effective way to prospective students, families, and the extended Dominican community.

And that is not the only new effort we are able to fund through the generosity of our extended Dominican family. The Acacia Project – the transformation of our physical campus – is being supported in multiple ways by our remarkable philanthropic community. The first stage was the transformation of Meadowlands. The beauty and functionality of that building, made possible through the generosity of Rolf Lewis, Valerie Hetherington, and so many of our extended community, is a testament to what is possible at Dominican.

The next stage in the Acacia Project is the library renovation. We have now raised over \$3 million to create the physical space for the Center for the Dominican Experience, including an art gallery, and an indoor-outdoor learning commons. This fall we will introduce you to some of the donors, and give you an opportunity to see the architectural plan; one that will honor Howard Friedmans' award-winning design of 40 years ago, while creating a vibrant and distinctive space for learning and connecting. We will continue to seek support for this centerpiece of the campus through the coming year. Renovations will begin as soon as we have secured the necessary resources to complete the project without debt funding.

The Acacia Project also calls for expanded student housing. Each year we lose students who want to attend Dominican, but cannot afford to live off campus, while our on-campus housing is completely full. We are actively exploring a variety of ways to increase our housing stock, and have identified several promising possibilities. Increased student housing would allow us to support more continuing students, would create viable space for more international students, and would reinforce our strong sense of community. As the opportunities become more tangible, we will work closely with student life and the finance office to make them a reality.

These initiatives, whether renovating the physical campus or supporting the academic core, are about improving the educational environment for students. And to do this work well, the quality of our own environments, of our own work life, is also important. In building a strong educational community for our students, we must also nurture a community of care, support, and integration for each other. I mentioned that last year felt like a stress test. We have come through it well, and now we must move beyond it, valuing our community, continuing our focus on equity, and creating a budget healthy enough to support appropriate salary adjustments.

Many of you are recent arrivals to Dominican. But many of you were here long before I arrived. Much of what is strong and important about this university is your creation – the commitment to community, the deep faith in Dominican values, the sense of shared purpose, the recognition of education as both a personal and a collective endeavor. It is crucial that we hold and build upon that good work, even as we continue to adapt. We will seek the Aristotelian golden mean between stewardship and innovation, between preserving the best of our traditions and building new programs and initiatives that respond to current needs.



And we will continue to discuss this work together. This fall, Vice President Pitchford and I will visit each of schools to share in more detail the work of these initiatives, and to hear your perspectives. I will also visit staff assembly, and spend time with the ASDU leadership for similar conversations.

As we continue our work, it is important to remind ourselves of its underlying importance. Our work has enduring meaning, not because we change the world, but because we change lives. I can give you a very current example of what that means.

Earlier, I mentioned our work to engage students with our national democracy, specifically with the presidential debates. When I describe College Debate '16 to people beyond Dominican, the response has become predictable. First, people offer some variation of 'how encouraging,' or 'this is so important right now.' If they don't know Dominican, the next remark is equally predictable: "that's amazing, but why Dominican?" I am happy to say that is an easy question to answer.

Dominican created CD '16 because we believe in the power of ideas, and this was our idea. Dominican because we believe individual voices can make a difference. Dominican because we are still able to have honest conversations about difficult issues. Dominican because the term student athlete has literal meaning here. Dominican because our students look like California, and like the future of this country. Dominican because we still know our advisees not only by name, but by sight (and often by sound). Dominican because the beauty of the grounds, and the compassion of the staff, and the work of the faculty, are all dedicated to student success.

Dominican because of the Dominican values: a history of service, a belief in study, a practice of reflection, and a faith in community. Dominican because Stephen Jay Gould is right, acts of destruction are healed through thousands of acts of creativity. Dominican because the novelist Philip Pullman is right, hope is not an emotion but a virtue and a duty. Dominican because Lin Manuel Miranda, the brilliant composer of the Broadway musical Hamilton, was right when, in the wake of the Orlando massacre, he said:

...senseless acts of tragedy remind us  
That nothing here is promised, not one day...  
[but] We lived through times when hate and fear seemed stronger;  
We rise and fall and light from dying embers,  
Remembrances that hope and love last longer  
And love is love is love is love is love is love is love is love  
cannot be killed or swept aside.

Dominican because we are in the business of hope. Dominican because we are in the business of education. And yes, Dominican because we are in the business of love – love for our work, love for our students, love for our community, and love for the future. Dominican because we have changed lives on this campus for 126 years. This place changes people. In the last five years, it has changed me as well – and I thank you for that change.