

DEAN'S ADDRESS
Fall 2022
Delivered both live and via Zoom Webinar from the Pacific Room
Tuesday, September 20, 2022 – 9:00 a.m.

Kathleen Cassity, Ph.D.
Dean, WOU College of Liberal Arts & Sciences

Today marks my sixth address to the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences. Before we go any further, I would like to announce that my sixth address will also be my *last*.

Two weeks ago, I gave notice to Provost Winningham that I will be stepping down at the end of the academic year. That much, I know. What I do not yet know is whether I will be fully retiring or returning to the English faculty. I will make that decision within the next few weeks. While my exact steps after next June are not yet fully clear to me, what *is* clear is that I am stepping away from this role, by my own choice.

Funny things start to happen as you reach an age where the concept of “retirement” changes from an abstract, distant concept into an in-your-face thing. The world we know (or think we know) begins to disappear. We lose reference points that we thought would be eternal, like Queen Elizabeth and Betty White. We read online (a format that didn’t exist during our own formative years) that the cast members of *Friends* are now older than the inaugural cast of *The Golden Girls*. AARP Magazine – which, by the way, begins to look more and more interesting by the month -- features people on the cover like Bob Dylan, Brad Pitt, Cyndi Lauper, and Paul McCartney. Your kids, or your students, or both, ask you questions like, “Who is Paul McCartney?”

And, you begin to realize that more years of your life are now behind you rather than ahead. For all the losses you’ve already suffered, you know that you can only look forward to more of that. Now, this stage of life is not without its perks—you get some cool discounts and you can order meals off the cheap menus. But perks aside, this stage is not easy. It can, however, be deeply meaningful. It can be a time for taking stock, for reflecting, and pondering how you will respond to an ancient proverb, attributed to multiple sources: “A society grows great when its elders plant trees in whose shade they know they will never sit.”

I hope my last year as Dean of Liberal Arts & Sciences will be a year for planting metaphorical trees, even though I will not sit under their shade myself. I hope that, despite the incredible, in fact almost unbelievable number of stressors and challenges we have collectively endured as a college and as a university during my time in this position, I will hand over to my successor a set of high-quality academic programs that are well positioned for a positive future. For my successor’s sake, I also hope your time in the position goes just a little bit more according to the original game plan, that my successor does not experience quite as many encounters with terms like “unprecedented,” “the new normal,” or “I think you’re muted.”

As I reflect on where we've been—including places we had hoped never to be, places we never knew existed, and places we hope we never have to visit again—I also realize that despite all that, we have many reasons for hope. Those are what I will focus on today. Over the past few days I consulted with our stellar team of division chairs, while taking stock of what I see happening here at WOU. After gathering all our news, I was pleased to realize that despite many ongoing challenges and justifiable fears, a lot of things *have* improved since 2020, and we have many reasons to look forward to in the future. Here are just a few.

First, today we have scones! I mention this because it is symbolic, you know how much we nerdy English professors love symbolism. If you'll recall back two years in that awful year of 2020, I addressed you all on Zoom from my home office, and I said then, "I hope by this time next year, we will once again be gathered in the Pacific Room on a rainy day, eating miniature scones." Well, alas, 2021 came and went, and still, no scones. We were back to hybrid format, but more of us were on Zoom than in person, and we were scone-less. Today, there are more of us here in the Pacific Room than on Zoom. We have the best of both worlds—plus scones! So, we are making incremental improvements.

Next: Monmouth Avenue is open! The center of our campus is no longer a construction zone.

We have a new president, Jesse Peters. We have, for the first time, an Executive Director of Diversity and Inclusion, Dominique Vargas, along with a revitalized campus-wide commitment to prioritizing our commitments in this area and improving our campus climate. We also have a new associate provost, Judy Sylva. Each of these people brings deep knowledge, new energy, and a problem-solving focus that I believe will revitalize us and serve us well.

Another positive: We have several new programs coming on board this fall. In our Business & Economics Division, we have a new major program in Accounting, to serve our students in that high-demand area. We have a new interdisciplinary degree program in Creative Production, housed in Creative Arts but drawing upon multiple disciplines, which prepares students for a variety of media-based careers. Computer Science is rolling out a new major in Data Analytics, one of the most high-demand emerging occupations, that will serve our students very well. We're off to a good start with our new interdisciplinary degree in Cybercrime Investigation & Enforcement – an area that we all know is of growing importance, though we all wish such a field weren't necessary. We have newly reinvigorated teacher preparation pathways in both Music and Theatre. We have a new certificate in Computational Linguistics, a cutting-edge collaboration between our Humanities and Computer Science Divisions. Sociology is offering a new Social Work concentration, and Politics, Policy & Administration is offering new certificates in Nonprofit Management. If I have left out anyone, please accept my apologies in advance and let me know so I can correct that omission.

You can also expect more curricular innovations during the coming year. I am not going to poach the Faculty Senate's territory by mentioning specifics before our emerging programs go through the full curricular process, but I can assure you that some exciting innovations lie ahead for our campus.

Another plus: This all means we are collaborating! Each of these new and emerging programs has brought faculty together across programs, divisions, sometimes across colleges. Despite the challenges of meeting physically and the fact that almost all of us are tired, we continue to work together to come up with new and better ways of combining our vast areas of knowledge, in order to better serve our students and communities.

Still more positives: As you heard yesterday, while we have work to do to bring enrollments to where they need to be, both our numbers of both freshmen and graduate students are slightly up. Again, incremental progress, though we still have work to do to get where we want to be.

Last week, every division in LAS participated in our new PACK Welcome Week activities. I'd like to extend a personal thank-you to everyone who participated, knowing full well how busy everyone is. You're pushing through and doing what needs to be done.

Destination Western has continued for a second year, and the data demonstrates that this new program has had an unprecedented positive effect on our first-year retention.

Willamette Promise, our dual enrollment program, continues to be a vital element of multiple LAS disciplines. The data shows this program is truly a game-changer for success among students from historically excluded populations.

Our relationships with feeder community colleges, particularly Chemeketa and Linn-Benton, are stronger than ever, with numerous joint projects and faculty-to-faculty relationships having been built over the past year.

We continue to earn more and more grant funding, while increasing our capacity in this area. Today I'd like to tell you about a couple of success stories in particular. First, our Music Department has received a grant from the Oregon Cultural Trust to support our work with the Matthew Shepard Project, which will highlight the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth in rural Oregon with the 25th anniversary of the murder of Matthew Shepard as a lens. This multifaceted project will include the first presentation of *Considering Matthew Shepard* in Oregon, employing professional orchestral musicians while bringing together both paid semi-professional and community choirs. The concert will be paired with a WOU Theatre Department performance of *The Laramie Project* that will feature student, faculty, community and guest professional performers and collaboration. We will also host Judy Shepard—Matthew's mother—as a guest speaker. She will share Matthew's story and discuss the importance of creating safe spaces for all of our youth. These performances and presentations will take place in March 2023. Although much of the content may be difficult to hear and process, I know that this experience will be powerful and transformative, and I'm grateful to our Creative Arts Division for taking the lead on this important project.

Also, thanks to our Theatre Department, WOU has landed its very first grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. (We are *in!*) This project will bring the Teatro Milagro company in Portland to campus next July for three performances of "The Complete Works of William Shakespeare, Abridged"—all in 97 minutes, and in Spanish. Teatro Milagro has spent

36 years providing extraordinary Latiné theatre, culture and arts education in Oregon. Valley Shakespeare will also present its more traditional annual summer offering next year in August – we will present the Scottish play whose name must not be mentioned in the theatre.

Grant activity is productive in many other LAS units as well. Our NSM Division grant portfolio is especially vigorous, with Feier Hou in Chemistry working on an American Chemical Society Grant; David Szpakowski in Earth & Environmental Sciences working on a NASA Space Consortium Grant; Bryan Dutton in Biology, Steve Taylor and David Szpakowski in EES working jointly on the Ash Creek Water Control District grant; and several other substantial STEM grant applications that were submitted during the past academic year, on which we are awaiting word. We are grateful to Eric Dickey for doing so much to move our campus forward in the grants area, and we're all sorry to see him leave.

Institutionally, we will be applying for a Title III grant, as well as a HECC grant to expand our ability to grant Credit for Prior Learning. I know that several of you, across multiple divisions, are involved in both of those efforts, and I'd like to thank everyone who's working on these projects which I believe will be game changers for our students.

We are working with our partnership specialist, Jessica Murfin, to deliver unique learning opportunities both within and beyond WOU. For instance, on Saturday, December 2, Earlene Camarillo and Mary Pettenger in Politics, Policy & Administration will host a one-day seminar, "Effective Advocacy for Non-profit Organizations," on our Salem campus, along with a Zoom option. This seminar will feature some of Oregon's most experienced lobbyists as well as some of our legislators. This is just the first in what will be a series of events known as the Empowered Communities Project: Civic Engagement, Advocacy and Democracy. In November, our Music Department will host a professional development opportunity for students and K-12 music educators from around the State of Oregon with Music Education Consultants, the nationally recognized authority on Mariachi music education.

More good news: Study abroad is beginning to rev up once again! Last year we sent three students to study abroad in Germany and one in France. This year, four students will study in Germany all year. Our study abroad program is now under the auspices of our Director of Professional Pathways, Dr. Adry Clark, with assistance from our German instructor, Kristen Klay. Again, progress is incremental, but these important cross-cultural connections are being revived, and we hope to develop more support for our students to have these opportunities.

Looking back over last academic year, we had a highly successful Hispanic Serving Institution summit in April. Many people on campus spoke with me about how that event revitalized our energy, as it was the first major in-person campus event we had experienced in over two years. In May we also brought many notable leaders to campus from the local Latiné and tribal communities, including the Mexican Consulate in Portland, for the launch of our Open Educational Resource publication, *Hispanic Origins in Oregon*, co-edited by our Associate Professor of Spanish, Jaime Marroquin, with a translation edited by Associate Professor of English Lars Soderlund.

Our faculty have continued to engage in extensive, high-quality research and publication despite the many challenges we have all faced. For just one highlight, two of our Biology faculty members and two of our WOU alumni were featured in a *Science* magazine cover article this past year, and our NSM faculty totaled twelve publications completely over the finish line. I know there are many more success stories in our other divisions. If you have positive publication news to share with me, please send it along!

We're also rebuilding our community engagement initiatives. In the last academic year, our Math Department hosted the Polk County Math Festival as well as Polk County Math Circles. Jen Bracy in our Art Department and Mary Pettenger in Politics & Public Administration built robust alumni databases, and once again, our Computer Science Division hosted the Oregon Gaming Project competition on campus last May. Again, these are just a few examples. If you'd like me to highlight contributions from your unit, please get in touch with my office so I can share the good news.

In other news: You may recall that last February, we had an all-day virtual campus visit in connection with the American Council of Education's Learner Success Lab, from our ACE facilitator at Boston University and two peer reviewers, from the University of Texas-El Paso and the University of New England. We've now completed that process, and we received the written report from our reviewers just a few days ago. In fact, ACE gave WOU several positive national shout-outs on the ACE website, LinkedIn and other forums, as a prime example of success. WOU's team was also the only lab participant invited to present our work at the ACE conference in San Diego last March, and at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities conference in Portland last July. Adry Clark and Lars Soderlund presented our work at both events. (As a side note, I was also supposed to be there, but apparently the travel gods have decided that traveling is not something I get to do during 2022. That's a story for another time.)

I would like to personally thank those who participated on our ACE Lab Steering Committee during a turbulent time: Rajeeb Poudel, Shaun Huston, Laura Ellingson-Sayen, Mary Pettenger, Dana Schowalter, Hillary Fouts, Feier Hou, Lars Soderlund, Justin Sunada, Jessica Murfin and Adry Clark, along with several folks who have since left WOU.

I would like to draw your attention briefly to a few of the findings in our ACE report. First, the positives: The ACE consultants determined that we WOU is already a learner success-oriented institution with a mission to serve a diverse range of students, including but not limited to students from historically excluded groups. Those of you who were on the Zoom call last February may recall that the review team left us with the commendation, "You are already doing the work." We are already the kind of institution we claim to want to be. Their written report suggests that we have a number of institutional strengths. Yet, they say, we are perhaps not the best at seeing this success ourselves, not the best at telling our own story, not the best at tooting our own horns, and not the best at coordinating our efforts. Where we *can* improve is by making our collective work both more coordinated and more visible.

I want to share with you some of the review team's suggested action plans. These include building alumni boards in every program, which will allow current *and prospective* students in

every major to connect with employers and leaders in the broader community. Building connections with successfully employed alumni in every field will allow us to provide more experiential learning opportunities to our students, *and* market our programs to prospective students and their families. Along with that is a suggestion to articulate the career competencies that our students are gaining, in *every* course, to help our students to think more intentionally about the marketable skills they are building regardless of what they are studying. This is an area in which I have considerable experience and expertise from my prior institution, so I hope these are some trees I can help you to plant this year.

One note from the report: ACE mentioned that, and I quote, “at times, the discussion of career competencies seems to be focused on the liberal arts versus career education debate, rather than incorporating the relevancy of both domains.” Correcting this false dichotomy that ACE points out in its report is something on which I’d like to spend a lot of my own time and energy this year: we are not *either* offering our students a transformative education grounded in the liberal arts *or* preparing them for the workforce. Higher education is a both/and proposition, not an either/or proposition.

It is not helpful for any of our programs to view the other programs on campus as our antagonists. We are not one another’s antagonists. We are one another’s partners. We all need each other. Assuming that any students—not just our own students—can afford to pursue an education without thinking at all about their own future employability is, I would argue, elitist. Yet I would also point out: Assuming the less quantifiable benefits of a liberal arts and sciences education should only be available to those who have cultural and economic privilege already, is *also* elitist. If we are going to transform the lives of individuals from all walks of life, we cannot choose between offering them economic well-being, *or* transformation and meaning. **We have to do both, for everybody.**

Last night, in a fit of probably ill-advised nostalgia, I dug out a copy of my first dean’s address, the one I delivered right here in this room back in 2017, when I had only been living in Oregon for five weeks. I wrote that during a more optimistic time—a time before pandemics, before wildfires, before ice storms, and before our campus crisis. In some ways, reliving that time was not easy. I had high hopes then, not all of which have materialized. But my time here is not yet over. I also realized, in re-reading that speech, that I still believe what I said to you then. I quoted then from Adam Gopnik, who wrote several years ago in the *New York Times*:

“No sane person proposes or has ever proposed an entirely utilitarian, production-oriented view of human purpose. We cannot merely produce goods and services as efficiently as we can, sell them to each other as cheaply as possible, and die. Some idea of symbolic purpose, of pleasure-seeking rather than rent seeking, of Doing Something Else, is essential to human existence.”

Paying the bills is, of course, also essential to human existence. We need to prepare our students for both.

Still more cause for optimism: *We are making progress on a college restructure.* You may be wondering why I listed this as a point of good news, since I certainly understand that for

many of you, this prospect may be unsettling. You've only known the structure that we have. Change can be challenging during the best of times, all the more so when so many recent changes have been stressful to the point of traumatic. But I see this as a positive because frankly, we have a structure here at WOU that does not work. We have two colleges, dramatically imbalanced, and LAS has an enormous and diverse portfolio as well as an insufficient quantity of leadership to manage it effectively. That is not a sustainable strategy going forward.

This fall, the restructuring task force will present the academic units with multiple opportunities to consider and offer feedback on a draft (I emphasizes, DRAFT) proposal that will better balance our units and provide adequate leadership for addressing issues, with enrollment, retention and, hence, the long-term survival of ALL our programs, foremost in mind. This will be an opportunity for collegial dialogue, mutual learning, and ultimately, a draft recommendation to the provost that includes the unique perspectives and wisdom of each and every one of us.

That doesn't mean everyone will get everything they want. That isn't be conceptually possible. And the reorganized structure won't be completely ideal. That would require a depth of resources that we simply do not, at this time, have. However, I am fully confident that we will emerge with a new proposed structure that, if not perfect, is still significantly *better* than what we have now; a structure that serves every unit more effectively, and that allows for future leadership to have the time, energy, and necessary focus in scope to build up every program, garner necessary resources, and move us into a brighter future—a reorganization that will keep all of our programs alive, and will bring about the renaissance, or rebirth, of the oldest public university in Oregon.

I think you'll agree, that is a lot of reason for hope. I also assume these positives are only the tip of the iceberg, as I'm reasonably certain that in the next few days, I will receive emails or drop-in office visits from folks who want to know, "How come you didn't mention the project that I'm involved with?" If you're involved with something positive and forward-looking that I didn't mention today, I apologize for the omission – I think you can see there's a lot to keep track of here. Please submit your story to my office through the link on the Dean's Office web page so I can publicize your news campus-wide during my quarterly newsletters. Last year I managed to send out news during two of our three academic quarters; this year I'm more ambitious, and I hope to send out a newsletter once during all three terms. I can only share what I'm told about, so please, send your information our way.

So, we have much reason to be hopeful. But the challenges also remain real. As we heard yesterday from President Peters, there are a number of things that we need to turn around—our enrollments, and the budget implications that follow, chief among them. We know that if we're going to build our programs effectively over the long term, we need adequate faculty lines and adequate staff; and we have a chicken-and-egg problem, because we can't add those resources without first having student enrollment that is adequate to support them.

We know that in many areas on campus, compensation and equity still need to be addressed. We know we're still reeling from the pandemic, and from the fiscal challenges we continue to endure. We know that inclusion, belonging, and our campus climate still have room

for improvement. We know that it's an ongoing challenge to find the right mix of course modalities and remote versus in-person work, because it's difficult to meet the wide-ranging needs of our diverse students while offering staff and faculty the flexibility they need AND while maintaining vitality and human connection on our campus.

We know that we've suffered extensive turnover (like virtually every sector of our economy), with consequent overwork and burnout for those of us who remain. We know that none of this has been conducive to our collective morale. We also know we will soon be searching for a new LAS Dean. All of these things will be struggling for dominance with the many reasons for hope that I outlined today. The struggle is real.

Last year I concluded my address by sharing three things I knew to be true. Since few of us have photographic memories and I'm somewhat short this year on original content, I wanted to conclude today's talk by reasserting those three truths. First: Each of you have done, and are doing, important and valuable work.

Next: The status quo is not working. The multiple crises of this decade known as the 2020s have made that much clear. That is exactly why our work matters, and why we must continue to do it. Our work is valuable because right now, growth and change are desperately needed—and we are in the business of helping people grow and change.

Finally: Certainty is an illusion. If you've gotten this far in life, you already know how to work through uncertainty because you always have. To quote the late, great John Lennon: "Life is what happens while we are making other plans." (And yes, probably some person younger than me will soon ask me, "Who was John Lennon?")

Which brings me back to the announcement I made at the beginning of today's talk. Today is my sixth and final dean's address. It is also my third address of the pandemic era, meaning I have done more than half of my work here at WOU under pandemic conditions. No wonder I am tired. These conditions were not of our own choosing, and could not even have been imagined back when I accepted this position. I arrived just as we implemented a new strategic plan, *Forward Together: 2017-2023*, with a little hyphen in between the starting and ending years. Who could have imagined how much trouble can be embedded in a little mark of punctuation?

Despite all the challenges, as this will be my final year in the role, I hope to make it my best. I plan to work with all of you on many new initiatives that position our institution for a brighter future. My goal is to help each of you plant some trees – and I would add, trees that are strong enough to withstand ice storms and not land on people's houses – even if I will not be here to sit beneath their shade.