Defining moments

With its 10-year strategic plan, the university has a new story to tell

by Ron Thomas

All of us have faced times of great challenge and opportunity, when choices are presented and decisions are made that reveal our innermost character and our fundamental values. These are the critical moments that determine destiny. A man landing on the moon defined a generation; the fall of the Berlin Wall defined another. Our personal lives are marked by defining moments, too: the choice of a college, a life partner, a career, or where to live, for example.

The same can be said of organizations, and I believe that Puget Sound is facing a defining moment in its history. Why is this so?

First, there are external reasons. This is the information age, we are told: I read recently a new study by the World Bank called “Where Is the Wealth of Nations?” claiming that sustainable national wealth is no longer measured in property or natural resources or other tangible assets, but in intangible assets—human capital, information, aspiration, cultural capital, and the knowledge to use them. These are precisely the forms of value in which we trade at a place like Puget Sound. Our core mission is to be the producer and guardian of human and cultural capital, to understand and develop core guiding values. All that is on the positive side of this defining moment.
Our goal is not to be as good as someone else but to be the best versions of ourselves we can be. On the negative side, we hear voices from everywhere affirm that American higher education is in a state of crisis. This year alone the government cut $12.7 billion in financial aid from the federal budget, the largest cut in history, narrowing college accessibility to a smaller portion of the population. This at a time when the value of education makes more of a difference in the success of a person’s life than ever—some say more than a million dollars of income, on average, earned over the course of a lifetime. Meanwhile nations like China and India, emerging economic powers, are vastly increasing their investment in higher education. Perhaps they understand better than we do, at least in their public policy, where the wealth of nations lies in the future.

Internally, there are other reasons for this time to be a defining moment for Puget Sound. Within this larger context, Puget Sound is at a crossroads when we must again define ourselves. We have faced such moments before:

- In 1888, when our founders envisioned a college that would become the best in the new Northwest Territory and one of the finest in the country—as fine as the great universities of Boston and Chicago, they said.
- When, after a period of financial crisis in the early 20th century, we reorganized and came to our current campus site in 1923, with President Todd’s idea of establishing on this marshy bramble patch in the North End of town a memorable and inspiring residential campus in the Gothic style, like the great old universities of Cambridge and Oxford.
- And again, after World War II with the influx of GIs returning from the war, as President Thompson grew the College of Puget Sound into a comprehensive university, with new programs, professional schools, branch campuses, and new buildings and expanded influence in the city and region.
- And then in the 1970s, under the leadership of President Phibbs and later President Pierce, when we refocused the university as a liberal arts college in the first order of academic excellence, trimming back on the expansions in graduate programs and eliminating branch campuses, establishing a Phi Beta Kappa chapter as a seal of commitment to academic excellence, producing our first two Rhodes Scholars, creating pioneering interdisciplinary study programs like International Political Economy and Asian Studies, among the first undergraduate colleges in the country to do so, and reshaping the School of Business into an interdisciplinary liberal arts curriculum, the School of Business and Leadership.

Every quarter century, we seem to face a defining moment. We are at another such moment right now as we approach our 125th birthday. What are the choices before us at this moment? What is the great opportunity that presents itself now? What are the risks we must avoid, and the chances we must take to advance the university once more?

This is a moment in which our goal is not to write a new story about ourselves, but to gather our accumulated assets from earlier times and, together, to strike out in a direction uniquely our own. In each of our previous crossroad moments, we showed innovation and inventiveness and originality. But in each of them, we also had a model to which we aspired—our founders’ dream was to be a great college like those in the East; it was Todd’s dream to have a beautiful Tudor-Gothic campus like Oxford and Cambridge; Thompson dreamed of expanding our programs to be more like a comprehensive university; most recently, our dream has been to be a great liberal arts college like those outstanding residential colleges in New England and the Midwest. All were desirable aspirations.

Now our defining moment offers us the chance to deploy the strengths we have gathered and do something different: to emphasize how our unique history and the values that drive us now—the intangible cultural assets of the Puget Sound experience—are somehow distinctive from everybody else. They express an identity uniquely our own. Our goal is not to be as good as someone else but to be the best versions of ourselves we can be, to be a place like no other, a residential college with the opportunities of a great university, an innovative and inspiring university that is engaged with the world and is an investment for a lifetime. Not to aspire to a standard, but to be the standard.

How will we do that? We will do it with a clear vision for who we are and who we will become and the right plan to get us there. Our strategic plan is such a plan, and it rests on four key concepts:

- These are the defining terms of this defining moment.

Innovate

We are different from other colleges and universities because we have always had a tradition of innovation. We are a fine liberal arts college, but we also have a School of Business and Leadership, one of only two or three in the country. We have a School of Music with eight performing ensembles. Again, one of only two or three. No other college has both. And none can combine them with a School of Education that is training teachers and principals and counselors while it speaks to the great issues of education in this age of information that our nation is facing.

No one has a Center for Health Sciences, as we are now planning to complement these distinctions—one that will combine psychology and exercise science at the undergraduate level with physical therapy and occupational therapy at the graduate level and a neuroscience curriculum integrating these disciplines. We will maintain our focus on the core mission of the liberal arts and integrate that with these clinical strengths not usually affiliated with the liberal arts.

No other college will have a Center for Strategic Issues, like the one we are planning, that will deploy faculty and student research and teaching on issues in the South Sound region that have national and even global significance—issues like energy conservation and water quality, homelessness, educational access, and the achievement gap. These are pilot projects in our Civic Scholarship Initiative that faculty and students are now pursuing in partnership with Pierce County, the city of Tacoma, and the state of Washington.

The truly great innovators at Puget Sound are our faculty and students, and this plan for innovation includes additional faculty and substantial financial aid to attract the best and brightest students.

Inspire

We have one of the most inspiring campuses in the country. We think so, of course, but so does everyone who visits our campus. Last year we completed a 20-year master plan for the campus. It is called the Tapestry of Learning,
and our first projects call for completing a spectacular new science building, Harned Hall [see page 12] and renovating Thompson Hall. It will be one of the finest undergraduate science education facilities in the nation.

We will also unite the north and south ends of campus with a dramatic landscape element called Commencement Walk, invoking the ritual march from Jones Hall to the fieldhouse taken by every Puget Sound graduate on Commencement day. Commencement Walk will be bordered by a beautiful new Health Sciences Center. It will be marked by a newly exposed stand of giant fir trees at the south end of campus. And it will culminate in an expanded athletics and recreation complex. The facilities services offices and shops will be relocated to the periphery of campus, and the temporary buildings they now occupy at the heart of the campus along with the departments of occupational therapy and physical therapy will be replaced by an expansive green space. This is an inspired plan, and it promises an inspirational result.

Goals for the Defining Moments strategic plan

I. Enhance and distinguish the Puget Sound experience
   • Develop resources for embracing curricular innovation focused on environmental, international, and civic concerns
   • Create new faculty lines to enhance faculty recruitment and retention, strengthen targeted programs at the intersection of disciplines, and generate opportunities for faculty research and student mentoring
   • Strengthen and promote academic achievements and partnerships in the arts and music, education, health sciences, and business and leadership that engage regional issues for their national significance and recognition

II. Build an inspiring physical environment for learning
   • Complete the Science Center and natural history museum
   • Build a Center for Health Sciences as a distinctive academic and clinical asset uniting psychology, exercise science, and physical and occupational therapy
   • Create Commencement Walk to integrate the north and south sectors of campus and establish a new grand campus entrance and approach
   • Expand and improve recreation facilities to promote health and fitness for the campus community

III. Forge lifelong relationships
   • Reorient the alumni office from a program-based operation to a strategic center for cultivating mutually beneficial relationships
   • Develop and manage a network of volunteer opportunities to generate an array of connections and services for alumni, parents, and friends
   • Enhance external and internal campus programs and communications to reflect and promote our mission, vision, values, and strategic goals

IV. Strengthen our financial position
   • Meet student financial need through increased annual giving and endowment
   • Strategically deploy the university’s endowment asset allocation, spending policy, and leverage capacity
   • Implement an inspiring and successful comprehensive campaign to support the advancement of the university for many years to come

For more on the Defining Moments strategic plan, see www.ups.edu/strategicplan.xml
For more on the Tapestry of Learning campus master plan, see www2.ups.edu/mp/project_overview.htm