



The Public University's Role in Tending Democracy

President Ana Mari Cauce
wələbʔaltx^w - Intellectual House, University of Washington
October 15, 2019

Remarks as prepared for delivery

Thank you, Joe. and by the way, if you haven't heard it, I recommend checking out Joe's podcast, "Documents that changed the world." It's a fabulous example of how a talented scholar is connecting his work to stories that are fascinating and relevant to everyone.

And a warm thank you to our Regents here: Joel Benoliel, Joanne Harrell, Constance Rice, Rogelio Riojas, Daniela Suarez and David Zeeck.

It's been fun spending so much time together at a number of fabulous events since the start of the year.

And thank you all for joining me for this annual tradition, whether you're here in the wələbʔaltx^w - Intellectual House or watching remotely. Your participation in our great public university IS what *makes* it great.

Before I proceed, it's important to acknowledge that we are on the land of the Coast Salish peoples which touches the shared waters of all the tribes and bands within the Suquamish, Tulalip, and Muckleshoot nations. This beautiful space we are sharing is a living reminder of the tribes and the native people who founded and remain integral to our community.

I always look forward to this annual address because it affords me the privilege and opportunity to talk with you, the University of Washington community, about the things we care most about: our public mission and our impact locally, nationally, and globally. Today, I also want us to consider the role our great public university plays in advancing the freedoms and responsibilities that define our 243-year-old republic.

Every intellectual inquiry, act of creation, lifesaving treatment and inspired student is an extension of our public mission. It begins when we create pathways – to excellence and opportunity for our students, often beginning well before they ever set foot on any of our campuses.

If you read the papers – and I hope you do – you'll find that a lot of the focus on higher education these days is on job attainment and starting salary. And, of course, that's something we care about and excel at. This year, CNBC conducted a brand new ranking of "colleges that pay off." (And I especially like "new" rankings because they say so much more about a university's intrinsic motivations than ratings that have been out for a while. First-time rankings show what we're doing because WE think it's important, regardless of who's counting or handing out awards).

So – drumroll? What’s the top public university in terms of return on investment for students, as measured by comparing what they actually paid for their bachelor’s degree to their starting salaries after graduation? You guessed it — the University of Washington Seattle Campus!! And who was the second public university that “pays off”? UW Bothell – ahead of the University of Michigan and Georgia Tech no less. How about that!

This new ranking says a lot about how our undergraduates get an affordable *and* excellent education that prepares them to compete for top employment opportunities. And through the individual success of our graduates, we build the workforce our state needs most. And that’s key, because so many of our students, undergrads and grads alike, wherever they started out, stay right here in the state of Washington after they graduate.

But, as proud as I am about our success in preparing students for good jobs that support Washington’s workforce development, the value of a UW education isn’t measured solely, or even primarily, by our students’ starting salaries. It’s about our graduates’ ability to pursue meaningful careers, using and developing their talents and passions in service to the greater good and a higher purpose. It’s in their contributions as engaged community members, who bring critical analysis to the important decisions they will make throughout their personal, professional and civic lives. As my mentor’s mentor W.E.B. DuBois, the first African American to earn a doctorate at Harvard and one of the founders of the NAACP, stated so aptly — our goal must be to provide our students with an education that will prepare them to “not only to earn a living, but to earn a life”

A wonderful example of this is Tammy Teal. A recent graduate in civil engineering, Tammy is the daughter of a Cambodian refugee, and the first person in her family to go to college. She enrolled at the UW as part of the engineering red-shirt program STARS, and today, she is a transportation engineer working right here in Washington to improve our state’s infrastructure. Tammy’s success story is, above all, her own. But it is also her family’s story, the UW’s story and the state of *Washington’s* story.

And just as Tammy is beginning to make her mark on the world, just last week, in this very same space, we celebrated the life – and mourned the loss – of Marvin Oliver, an alumnus, and later faculty member, who made a HUGE impact with his life and work. Marvin changed the way the world sees Native American art and culture through his artistry and his teaching. We miss him a lot, but we are proud to have played a part in the change he created.

All around us are alumni and students making an impact, many of whom faced significant hurdles in the process. Thirty-four percent (that’s a little over a third) of our undergraduates are the first in their families to earn a bachelor’s degree. With their degrees, they not only alter the trajectory of their own lives, but that of younger siblings and cousins, and their children and grandchildren.

And, there are the more than 40,000 students who have been able to afford a UW degree because of the Husky Promise, which ensures that the cost of tuition will not be a barrier for Washington state undergraduates of modest means.

We also create the next generation of educators, scholars and researchers by expanding access to graduate and professional education through programs like GO-MAP which supports students of color, most of whom are also first in their families to attend college. And, we prepare physicians, nurses, pharmacists, physician assistant, and dentists to provide healthcare to underserved and rural regions across our state and a five-state region through our medical education program and our regional partnership with Gonzaga University in Spokane.

Quite frankly, given our size and breath, we don’t just create pathways to opportunity, we are creating highways!

Building and maintaining those “highways” is our mission, but as a public university, we depend on public support to fulfill that mission. A year ago, I stood right here and painted a blunt, and scary picture of the risks to our university, and to higher education throughout the state without more public reinvestment. No one wants to start the year off on a low note, but I felt it was my public duty to share the reality of what was at stake, because the stakes were high. Our work and impact effects our entire state and well beyond.

Well, thanks to students, faculty and staff, especially our outstanding State Relations team, we were heard in Olympia. Our efforts were helped by friends and supporters around the state, including UW Impact, the UWAA’s advocacy program. These alumni and supporters met with their legislators, provided testimony at public hearings and sent more than 2,500 emails to legislators. The result was a budget that begins to reverse the long trend of disinvestment. Make no mistake: we are still running lean and there is more progress to make, but as the saying goes, when you’re in a hole, stop digging, and the digging has stopped. Now we have to keep that momentum going.

That same momentum is evident in the success of the Be Boundless campaign. As we enter the campaign’s final year, I am profoundly grateful to the hundreds of thousands of supporters who have contributed and who share the UW’s commitment to impact.

Many UW donors – including lots of you in this room – are UW alumni who realize how what they learned and experienced here has added value to their lives. We thank you for paying it forward, making sure others have the same opportunities you did.

But more than half of our donors are not UW alumni, some have never set foot on campus, or been served by our hospitals or clinics. They give to protect the natural beauty that surrounds us, to discover new vaccines to stop the spread of communicable diseases, and because they value works of art that inspire and bring us together. They give to, and *through* us as an investment in the future. In many cases, it’s very purposeful research that led them to the UW’s centers, laboratories and studios changing how we understand our world and ourselves. The scholarship and research that takes place here leads to innovation and discovery that adds to our knowledge and abilities, contributes to longer, healthier lives and informs evidence-based policies that lift up all people, everywhere.

Clean Energy Institute researchers have found a new kind of semiconductor that could be the key to transforming brittle and bulky solar panels into paper-thin film that could be applied virtually anywhere.

And research informs Forefront Suicide Prevention’s work with veterans and their families to reduce the risk of suicide in the home.

Researchers at the Institute for Protein Design are working on a synthetic protein that may one day allow us to program our own cells to repair a brain injury.

Across the UW, research takes us to the furthest frontier of human knowledge and moves us a step closer to turning yesterday’s science fiction into today’s reality.

And even as we look outward to investigate the edges of the known universe, we are also looking inward, exploring what it means to be ethical, creative and just.

Our law school works with the Tulalip Tribes to divert nonviolent drug offenders.

UW philosophy students go into local classrooms to introduce concepts like the nature of knowledge, identity, ethics and freedom to elementary school students.

At the UW, astounding technical and medical advances happen alongside the important work of exploring what those advances mean to us as a democracy, as a society and as human beings. This mindset is fundamental to our Population Health Initiative that brings together our unique combination of strengths to make people's lives better.

Our hospitals and clinics see almost 1.8 million patients a year, providing the preventive care that stops a problem before it starts and performing life-saving procedures that were unimaginable a decade ago. UW data scientists are uncovering the conditions that cause persistent health disparities, and graduates in Social Work across our three campuses are working in schools and clinics across our state to ensure that people facing those disparities don't fall through the cracks.

As we prepare to open the Hans Rosling Center for Population Health next fall, the Initiative will remain a major institutional focus. A healthy population is essential to a strong democracy – and vice versa.

And, just like education, health is a broad concept. It's more than blood pressure and cholesterol levels — although I check mine regularly! And, yes, it's about producing more doctors and nurses and social workers – we need more! But, it's also about preparing teachers and data scientists, artists, and musicians, architects and lawyers, financial analysts, sociologists and ecologists.

And it's about examining the conditions that contribute to health. Healthy populations not only have access to health care, they have access to clean water and air; they live in communities with parks, green spaces and public works of art that promote, and are essential to, health. Every member of this community has value to add to this work, and Provost Richards and I intend to prioritize ways for even more of us to add that value to this effort.

Our focus on extending the work of Population Health includes turning the population health lens on ourselves, committing to deepening our emphasis on student wellness and resilience, ensuring students have adequate access to behavioral and mental health resources, and strengthening our efforts to prevent sexual harassment and abuse. We must build communities where we feel an obligation to each other as human beings, not despite, but because of, the wonderfully diverse array of backgrounds and experiences that we represent. We must strive to nurture a culture that brings out the very best in us all and where we all feel valued, because insecurity, suspicion and fear feed hate and division.

I know we are far from perfect and some members and sectors of our community do not always feel heard, understood, or appreciated. We have a lot of work ahead of us. Right now, we are undertaking a university-wide survey to better understand the culture and climate that you as students, faculty and staff experience in your lives and work. We want to learn what we can, and must do better, as we move to the next state of our Race & Equity Initiative. And my thanks to Dean Ed Taylor and Vice President for Minority Affairs and Diversity Rickey Hall, with the advisory committee including faculty, staff, and students from all three campuses, for leading this effort.

We also want to better understand what we're doing right. For six years straight we've been named a "Great College to Work For" by the Chronicle of Higher Ed, the only college or university in our state with that kind of record. So it's also important that we preserve those things that you value, and that made you choose us — and thank you for doing so! So, if you haven't already, I strongly urge you to take this confidential survey. You received an email with a link to the survey on October 8th and you have until November 8th to take it. Your voice matters, so please make yours heard!

As the University FOR Washington, creating an inclusive, compassionate culture is not a theoretical exercise or a luxury — it's as intrinsic to our pursuit of excellence as it is to our public mission. And it's a critical component of health!

Right now we're in the homestretch in an array of local elections — and if you can, don't forget to vote! And primary season is beginning to heat up as we enter a presidential election year. As a center of learning, we honor our mission of public service when we work to advance the democratic values that animate our most fundamental and cherished rights. So, this is an especially fitting time for us to consider how our work serves to uphold our democracy.

It's not a question of partisan politics, but of the ways in which our work helps to build and preserve a free, open and democratic society — a society governed by the rule of law, in which our goal is to see justice applied equitably and mercifully, where ideas can be expressed freely and disagreements can be discussed openly, at times passionately, even acrimoniously — but debated with words, not fists, sticks, stones or worse.

Much of the DNA of America's public universities originated in the 1862 Morrill Land-Grant Colleges Act, signed into law by Abraham Lincoln. The act allotted more than 17 million acres to institutions of higher education. Republican congressman Justin Smith Morrill, who sponsored the bill, envisioned these new public colleges as an antidote to the elite, private universities that served only the sons of privilege. Although the UW was founded just before the Morrill Act, with WSU following as a beneficiary, we both are heirs to this vision that continues to resonate.

In 1938 President Franklin Delano Roosevelt asserted that “Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choices are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard, therefore, is education.” Over the course of the twentieth century, our government wisely invested in making sure that the doors to higher education continued to swing open. Legislation from the GI Bill to the Education Amendments Act of 1972 kept ensuring college would not be reserved for only an elite few. Colleges and universities became increasingly open and affordable to all in our country, and they were widely understood to be a public trust, essential to the public interest and worthy of public investment.

During his visit to our campus 58 years ago, President John F. Kennedy noted, “[W]e shall need all the calm and thoughtful citizens that this great University can produce, all the light that they can shed, all the wisdom that they can bring to bear.” Notice — he didn't say, just the top 5 or 10%, or only those who could afford it. He said ALL.

At the University for Washington, we honor this vision by enlarging and expanding the educated middle class, combating the “barbell effect” that is pushing wealth to one end of the spectrum as more people slide into poverty on the other. There is ample evidence that a strong middle class drives a healthy economy and political stability. And that is especially important right now when violent extremism is on the rise in the US. and the ubiquitous presence of social media in our lives makes it easier for small, fringe groups to have an outsized impact. And we face a tidal wave of information with little to distinguish reliable, well-sourced reports from fear mongering and misinformation.

Compounding these threats is the perception — often fueled by those who stand to benefit from conflict — that we are a deeply divided and polarized society. The data shows that economic inequality has most certainly increased, widening class divisions. But, when it comes to core values, we are not as polarized as we imagine. We are united in strong support for the foundations of our democracy, like free and fair elections, maintaining a system of checks and balances, the right to nonviolent protest, and the freedom to elect and criticize our political leaders.

Tending democracy is *everyone's* job, but universities like ours play a *unique* role in this important work. Each year, we unleash thousands of educated people upon the world, prepared, in Roosevelt's words, "to choose wisely." In a country where we live in neighborhoods increasingly segregated by income and race, our classrooms and campuses are often the most diverse setting our students have yet experienced. Here, disparate voices and competing agendas must devise ways to coexist and get things done. We cultivate leaders, as students often get their first real taste of how to build consensus, consider an argument or stand up for a principle. This learning takes place not only in classrooms but in student organizations and clubs (RSO's), in student government, in Greek life, in business and non-profit internships and externships, in choruses and theater groups, on the sports field, and in study abroad and alternative Spring breaks.

At the University of Washington every student, from computer science to music, benefits from a liberal arts foundation to their education. Through teaching and scholarship in the humanities, we cultivate the ability to reason and be reasoned with, and students develop the ability to place the problems of today within the context of the struggles of humanity throughout the ages. In every discipline, we teach and reward intellectual honesty and rigor. We find new lenses through which to explore our past, like the upcoming lecture by renowned scholar Domenico Laurenza about how Leonardo Da Vinci's work illuminates the intersection between art, science and innovation.

For the UW, impact goes beyond astounding technical and medical advances to encompass what those advances mean to us as a democracy, as a society and as human beings. We examine primary sources and collect data. We seek out evidence, and when the evidence disagrees with our hypotheses, we revise them.

We are grounded in a shared knowledge and understanding – an agreement that facts must lead any analysis – and that we make better policies when they are informed by research and analysis. Academia's capacity to debate and rigorously interrogate assumptions is at the heart of the research enterprise. And the UW is home to groundbreaking research, scholarship and innovation that helps to shape our democracy. This work illuminates difficult issues and applies innovative problem-solving to challenges – like election hacking and deep fakes – that were unimaginable only a few years ago. In these ways, we shed the light that Kennedy described.

The newly-launched Center for an Informed Public epitomizes the interdisciplinary nature of this important work. Combining expertise from the Information School, Human Centered Design & Engineering, the School of Law and the Communication Leadership Program, the center will enhance the work of tackling the real-world problems that are threatening our collective understanding of objective truth. These challenges are not abstractions: they manifest in our daily lives; for example in vaccine skepticism or opposition to net neutrality. As a public research university, we can and must apply research to issues like these, just as we would to an Ebola outbreak or a decline in the orca population.

Through the Stroum Center for Jewish Studies in the Jackson School, Professor Noam Pianko is bringing much-needed cultural and historical context to the controversy that arose when the president urged Israel to deny entry to two US Congresswomen who are practicing Muslims.

Professor of Pediatrics Fred Rivara is leading the School of Medicine's new Firearm Injury and Policy Research Program, seeking evidence that can help reduce the terrible cost of gun injuries and deaths in Washington while still protecting Second Amendment rights.

At UW Tacoma, researchers Martine De Cock and Anderson Nascimento have developed a patented technology using machine learning to preserve privacy in health care data that a Seattle startup is using.

And the Center for Human Rights has been examining the implications of ICE Air's operations nationally, as well as in our own state. Such analysis can yield a deeper understanding of the role played by Washington state communities in federal immigration enforcement, which is necessary to craft improved policy at the local, state, and federal level.

These and countless other individual scholars and centers of research within the UW are essential to examining the systems, laws and traditions that form our democratic society. Their work is only possible in a society – and in a university – that permits and values free and unfettered inquiry. Sometimes this work will reveal where our systems and practices are failing us, falling behind the times, or are founded on a faulty premise. But this is essential to helping us understand where we can and must do better.

We also serve as conveners and leaders on matters of public interest, especially those that demand difficult conversations that have no easy answers. The ability to engage in tough conversations is important to a democracy – without them, we deprive ourselves of peaceful paths to change. Next month, the UW will host one such conversation, when the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine Collaborative on Sexual Harassment will meet on this campus. And in February, we will join Seattle in hosting the American Association for the Advancement of Science annual meeting, one of the world's largest scientific gatherings, advancing science and free-flowing exchange of ideas that benefit all people.

Our ability to bring people together for well-informed conversations about everything from immigration to gun violence to the ethics surrounding technologies like blockchain and machine learning is one of our great strengths. These collaborations and discussions are key to the process by which good ideas rise to the top and bad ideas are filtered out. It is not a flawless or speedy process, but it is foundational to a free and open society.

Democracy is messy. We sometimes stumble, or take a step – or two – backward. Yet the story of humanity remains one of progress – and universities like ours are critical to creating the conditions that fuel that progress. Every member of our extended UW community can participate in tending to our democracy, helping to repair damage when we find it and strengthening its pillars through our civic engagement.

The author Margaret Atwood, speaking to her own alma mater, described democracy as being like a muscle or brain: “use it or lose it.” As students, educators, innovators and explorers, we invigorate our democracy when we work to build a more just, free and open society.

We do face great challenges that demand not only our time and effort, but our optimism and talent for collaboration. I invite us all to ask ourselves what part we can play in tending to our democracy, to imagine how this great public university can lift up everyone it touches. Dream wildly about how each of us, as individuals and as a community, can contribute to that uplift.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.