



Finding Our Way Forward

President Ana Mari Cauce
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Remarks as prepared for delivery

Thank you, Chris.

I want to begin by acknowledging the Coast Salish peoples of this land I stand on, land which touches the shared waters of all tribes and bands within the Suquamish, Tulalip and Muckleshoot nations. I also acknowledge and honor the Tribal nations across Washington State and the many Indigenous peoples from across the country who live and work in the Puget Sound and across the state.

Thank you for joining me today to reflect upon our shared vision and mission as we return to campus life. And a special shout out to all the Regents who are watching — appointed by the Governor to steward our great university and make sure we honor our missions of teaching, research and service to promote and preserve the public good.

I also want to welcome our new chancellors — Kristin Esterberg at UW Bothell and Sheila Edwards Lange at UW Tacoma, and to all our new faculty and students – whether this is your first year, or your first year on one of our campuses, and of course, thanks to all who are returning, it's been lonely without you!! Thanks for tuning in.

When I last gave my annual address, we had been working under pandemic restrictions for more than six months. It was a frightening and uncertain time. Our understanding of how the virus spread was limited — remember how we waited several hours, or even days, before we touched delivery packages? But vaccinations were on the horizon and we thought once they came that would be that. We simply couldn't fathom the years-long process this would become, and the magnitude of the losses we would experience. Those losses have been breathtaking: nearly seven million across the world have died, including more than 700,000 in the United States. Here in Washington, with one of the lowest death rates in the nation, we have lost more than 8,000 of our family, friends and neighbors.

Even those of us who have been comparatively lucky over the last year, avoiding serious illness, lost loved ones or economic hardships, have missed births, weddings, graduations. We have almost all lost sleep, and spent months separated from loved ones near and far. Anxiety, depression and other mental health issues are on the rise for everyone. No one has been entirely unscathed.

Our experiences working and learning remotely have also varied – some of us found it very isolating, some struggled mightily with internet access or finding a good spot to study or work, some struggled to teach or take classes online while supervising children also taking classes online, some enjoyed having more time with family members or zooming with our pets on our laps – or all of the above! For most, it was a very mixed bag of significant hardships with some unexpected reckonings and silver linings.

And let's not forget – some never went online or remote, caring for community members in our hospitals and clinics, making sure students in our residence halls were fed and cared for, continuing to conduct important Covid-related research in their labs, and keeping the grounds and facilities clean and safe. We owe them a special debt of gratitude!

Whatever our experiences, returning to campus is not without its share of anxiety – Covid is still with us. But we ARE in a very different place than 18 months ago. We know how to protect ourselves and minimize risk -- through enhanced ventilation and air filters and well-fitting, multilayer masks. We have effective and accessible vaccines that not only greatly reduce our risk of contracting Covid, but for those without serious underlying health conditions, the risk of serious illness or needing to be hospitalized is extremely small. New research even suggests that the vaccinated may be considerably less likely to pass the virus on to others when they do get it.

Covid is still here, but we are not helpless. Anyone who wants to be on our campuses has easy, no-cost access to a vaccine, and I'm proud say that of the more than 50,000 of our students who have reported, 97% are vaccinated! And, under state requirements, every UW employee is also required to be vaccinated or have an approved exemption for medical reasons or a sincere religious belief. As of yesterday, those who have not complied are on unpaid leave or have been dismissed. But we very much hope they will get vaccinated and remain or return to the UW. That would be the preferred outcome – for us, and for them.

Right now more than 98% of UW personnel are now fully vaccinated —one of the best rates in the country. Given this and our other safety precautions, our public health experts are confident that we are minimizing our risks as we come to grips with the reality that the virus may wax and wane over the next several years. As of today, we have fewer faculty, staff, and students who have tested positive for Covid while we are in person, than at this time last year, when we were remote. The Husky Coronavirus Testing

positivity rate over the last seven days was 0.9% and it has dropped steadily since classes started. Our protocols are working, but we must remain vigilant, especially as cold and flu season arrives and outdoor events become less possible.

But what may prove just as challenging as overcoming the virus itself, is reestablishing, or better yet, creating new norms of culture and communication that were so strained in the disembodied on-screen world that was our main source of interaction outside our more homogeneous “pods.” Establishing new norms – is it a fist or elbow bump? - is going to take time and patience – with ourselves and each other. Change is hard, even when it’s good change — but we can make it easier when we approach each other with kindness, respect, empathy and compassion.

That compassion and kindness begins with ourselves. You may be feeling the weight of things that didn’t get done – the research that didn’t get completed as our labs, were shut down; as we spent time providing care to our children or family members; or as we continue to deal with the grief from those we have lost — and our very legitimate fears about the state of our world – not only due to Covid, but because of systemic racism, climate change, the plight of the homeless, the fragile state of our democracy — or all of the above. Oh – and did I mention supply chain disruptions? There IS a lot to be concerned about. And if you are concerned – if you can, don’t forget to vote!

But, If you’ve skipped a beat, lost a step, or even if you’ve tripped and fallen — it is understandable. Give yourself a break. I was talking to a student in his junior year a few weeks ago who was truly distressed that he still didn’t know what he wanted to major in – and his parents were distressed too! I reminded him he’d only been on campus for two quarters. It might take him longer to figure it out than is typical – and that beating himself up wasn’t going to help. Sometimes, we just have to take a deep breath and give ourselves permission to slow down, to pace ourselves, to breathe.

This is important for all of us to remember, but it especially applies to our students. So many are at an age where they are making choices that will affect the rest of their lives, a heavy burden to carry. It’s important to be there for them as they discover and define their passions and paths, even if it does take a little longer. We can all contribute to creating an environment conducive to helping them, and ourselves, feel more grounded and secure. As Megan Kennedy, Director of the UW Resilience Lab recently asked, “[How can we] take responsibility for creating a culture of well-being across all the folks who create our community?” In our journey back toward the things that make our campuses joyous and special places, it will take energy and effort from all of us to make that happen.

The stresses, and yes trauma, of the last 18 months won't disappear overnight. But all the vaccines, masks, and air filters in the world won't matter if we don't work in tandem to re-create cultural norms grounded in compassion, empathy and care. We must reconnect to own purpose and work toward shared goals, within which our individual goals are embedded. The pursuit of happiness may be enshrined in our constitution, but as holocaust survivor Viktor Frankel reminds us, neither happiness nor success can be directly pursued – they ENSUE, or follow, as a result of dedication to a cause greater than oneself. And this what our great University's public mission is all about.

Our anxiety and pain must not be overlooked. It's real, it's ongoing. But I urge us to also remember and take pride in how the pandemic showed clearly — when we are faced with a challenge, we meet it courageously. For every scary or tragic headline over the past year and half, there was also a story of inspiring courage, wisdom and ingenuity, often with a UW connection. The incredible range of knowledge, expertise and sense of purpose that the UW has brought to the table saved lives, offered reassurance, and kept us moving forward.

From the start, UW expertise and a drive to serve the public were at the vanguard of the Covid response. It was the Seattle Flu Study – a partnership between the UW, Fred Hutch and Seattle Children's – that identified what was then the first documented U.S. case of community transmission. This early work enabled our state and region to mobilize quickly, sounding the alarm nationwide that the virus had gotten a foothold in the U.S.

Across our region, the UW stood up testing sites, including in underserved neighborhoods where health inequities are most persistent. The UW Virology Lab quickly began testing samples, making it possible to track and slow the spread. The Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) created tools to model the trajectory, projecting how fast the virus would spread and teaching us all about the importance of “flattening the curve.” UW researchers sequenced the virus's genome as early as March of 2020 to trace its movement through the population. News consumers around the globe heard expert UW voices providing guidance and credible information. Our own amazing tri-campus UW Advisory Committee on Communicable Diseases came together on at least a twice-weekly basis to help our own campus navigate the perils of Covid. THANK YOU! And in our hospital Covid wards, UW healthcare providers worked heroically to save every patient possible. And when medicine could do nothing more, they held the hands of the ones who couldn't be saved. And they continue to do so, including for patients sent to us from other areas of the Northwest who can't access the quality care they receive here.

Meanwhile, the UW became the first major university in the nation to switch to remote learning. Over the course of a single weekend our incredible faculty pivoted to teaching remotely.

Faculty, Instructors and Teaching Assistants: not only did you continue to teach and mentor in your fields of expertise, but so many of you helped your students through this jarring transition, extending flexibility, understanding and empathy, even as you juggled your own personal burdens. The fact that our University continued to deliver on its core mission of serving students will forever be a credit to you.

Teachers like Assistant Professor of Human Centered Design and Engineering Nadya Peek. She teaches digital fabrication, which normally involves holding class in a makerspace with a 3D printer. When learning went remote, Nadya developed a whole new curriculum that helped students master computer-aided design and 3D printing skills from home.

And like Professor of Comparative Religion Jim Wellman, whose course called, “A Life Worth Living” had extra resonance during these difficult times. Jim’s students learn about how different aspects of religious beliefs give meaning to life, while exploring how to cultivate a sense of purpose. As one student wrote in their class evaluation, “Amidst a time of...national crisis, with the backdrop of a pandemic and...George Floyd’s murder, this class has been a source of hope that has grounded me in the values I want to stick to in my life.”

These are just two of countless stories that have emerged over the last year of educators who moved mountains to be there for students. To learn more, just read the bios of last year’s Distinguished Teaching Award winners like Professor Teddese Ghirmai, who teaches Electrical Engineering at Bothell. In his nomination, one of his students who recently graduated with his BS in Electrical Engineering wrote in his nomination: “As a full-time and international student living halfway across the globe from family and loved ones, I felt alone, sad, worried and overwhelmed by financial stressors that would come of my father’s stroke. When my grades inevitably plummeted...he took the time to talk, listen, understand and relate to me on a personal level..and help me find the courage to persevere in difficult times.”

Our students and our faculty are remarkable! And working together, they’re truly awesome!

That same willing spirit of determination and adaptability has also been a hallmark of our staff. Thousands of you packed up your desks and turned your kitchen tables and bedrooms into home offices. You quickly skilled up on new technology tools and incredibly, the day to day operations of our massive organization not only got done, but continued to set the bar for excellence.

Like Nedralani Mailo Logotala in the Center for Equity & Inclusion at UW Tacoma. She coordinates UW Tacoma’s food pantry, and as the pandemic picked up speed, she moved swiftly to ensure that they

remained accessible. Last spring, the pantry served more than 300 students and their families, distributing over 1,800 pounds of food.

Throughout the pandemic, I have been inspired by our community's resilience and determination to honor and expand how we deliver on our public mission by putting people first. I am confident that in the weeks and months ahead, that spirit of purpose and mission, grace and compassion will continue to define our approach to creating a new normal, an equicoverly, that strengthens our bonds as a community.

Our forward progress must redress the growing inequity in our country. This requires a recognition that the pandemic weighed disproportionately on the people and communities with the least privilege, those who were already most affected by economic instability and the daily indignities and fear caused by structural racism. They are the people and communities threatened by attacks on their voting rights and on their very bodies. The ones put at the greatest risk when cities flood in natural disasters. Traumas piled on traumas.

And the impact of the digital divide hit students from these communities most severely. Almost 50% of first-generation students reported having limited access to technology and 30% reported limited access to the internet. For these students, being back in the classroom is more than a matter of preference.

The UW, like all institutions, must reckon with our part in sustaining systematic racism and inequity. It's incumbent upon us to honestly examine our systems, practices and culture to understand how they reproduce and amplify privilege and to act. And we are taking actions that matter.

It matters that with the full support of our faculty, we made the SAT/ACT optional for admission— and not because it was forced on us by Covid. It is a permanent change that was already underway before the pandemic hit — because, the best predictors of success in college are much more holistic, especially in these days when the proliferation of expensive test prep has turned tests originally meant to level the playing field, into ones that magnify privilege.

It matters that we are reimagining the complex and fraught topic of campus safety. We recognize that for many BIPOC members of the community, the sight of an armed officer may not make them feel safer. So, we are working with UWPD and others from around our campus, to create solutions that maximize campus safety and a sense of security for everyone. We recognize that an armed responder is not always needed or the most helpful, and we are in the process of increasing the number of unarmed responders, including those with behavioral health and social work training. This is part of a broader effort to develop a more holistic approach to safety and security calls that prioritize fitting the response to the specific need,

and that acknowledges that the structures we have created to ensure safety have not done so in an equitable fashion.

That is evident not only in who is most apt to be a victim of police violence, as an IHME study has so clearly shown, but also on who is more apt to be incarcerated. That is why Dr. Ben Danielson, UW alumnus, physician and advocate for equitable healthcare is developing a program, with seed funding from the Bezos family foundation, to provide meaningful alternatives to youth incarceration.

It matters that we are working with our Faculty Senate to broaden the undergraduate diversity requirement across our campuses. Without a fuller understanding and appreciation of our history, literatures and practices, from perspectives that represent a full range of human experience and identity, how can we ever hope to prepare a new generation of leaders to tackle the problems that face the vast, diverse world we share?

Over the last five years, we have increased underrepresented faculty by 27%, and we expect that when we tally this year's new hires, that trend will continue if not accelerate! I say this not to congratulate ourselves – because much more progress is sorely needed – but to signal the seriousness of our commitment to a richly diverse community of faculty, staff and students who know that they belong here. In that spirit, Professor of Sociology Alexis Harris, together with the backing and support of Provost Richards, has launched the Faculty Development Program to help forge the networks and sense of belonging that make talented faculty want to not only come, but stay here. I was really thrilled to meet some of those faculty at a reception a couple of weeks ago.

It also matters that we provide support to our students holistically, supporting their academic progress and their emotional and mental well-being — because they ARE interrelated. Direct services – in the form of counselors – are an important part of that holistic approach, and we've combined our mental health units in Hall Health and the Counseling Center into a single unit to make it easier for students to access help, as well as providing 24/7 access to counselors who are available remotely. We also recognize that the available counseling must be culturally- and linguistically-competent, and we therefore have counselors with fluency in multiple languages. Because the language you work and learn in might not be the language that that you use when you talk about more intimate concerns.

Students — if you need help, ask for it – there are mental health resources and care available. The Resilience Lab and the Center for Child and Family Well-Being is offering Be REAL, a six-week program that promotes college students' well-being by helping them to develop cognitive behavior and coping skills. And we have tools and programs for instructors to help support whole student well-being.

On Friday I attended the groundbreaking for a new behavioral health teaching facility at UW Medical Center Northwest, made possible by state investment — thank you Governor Inslee and all our legislative champions! And the non-profit Ballmer Group has augmented these new investments in supporting the development of the workforce needed to expand treatment for mental and behavioral health in Washington, so sorely needed for all age groups.

Yes, the pace of change takes longer than most of us would prefer, but with commitment and persistence and partnerships it CAN happen. Research has documented the strong and seemingly unshakable stigma associated with having experienced trauma, being a victim of discrimination or abuse or seeking out mental health services. But it IS changing.

Some have suggested that the reason I've been open about the traumas I experienced during my student years – witnessing my brother's murder at the hands of the KKK, or having had an initial graduate advisor who was a harasser and worse — is to gain sympathy or to blunt the fact that I am now in a position of privilege and power — which I am well aware of. Truth is it took me almost 40 years to be able to talk openly about either outside of safe spaces. What gave me the courage was both my personal journey toward healing AND changing attitudes in our community. What made it necessary, was my role in launching the UW's Race and Equity Initiative and serving on the leadership board of the National Academy of Science's Action Collaborative for the Prevention of Sexual Harassment. It just felt fake and inauthentic to talk about those who had been victimized as “them” when it was “us”. Truth is some of us, and this is especially the case for BIPOC , women and/or LGBTQ plus faculty and staff, went into higher education to make it a better place for the next generation of students like us. And many of us are doing research on topics that dovetail with issues informed by our life circumstances — but when we say that, our work is sometimes still critiqued for lacking objectivity, or derided for being “me-search” instead of real research. Change takes time, especially if you want it to be lasting. Because it requires changing attitudes and structures.

Our goal at the UW is to do more than burn treetops, creating lots of fire and smoke that will blow away as the winds change. Our goal is to dig out at the roots and create structural change that will last. Small steps can leave deep imprints and create the momentum and confidence that will allow us to run and leap and eventually fly. What allowed us to so quickly turn our research into the tests, vaccines, and treatments that are saving lives was decades of public investment and faculty work on more basic research in the life and health sciences.

Change takes time. But it can happen if we commit to it, take actions sometimes large, sometimes small, then keep on moving forward with resolve -- even in the face of understandable impatience and cynicism. Early this summer, during that window after vaccinations and before the spread of the Delta variant, I traveled to Geneva to participate in the Glion Conference – a gathering of presidents or chancellors of top universities from Europe and around the world. I was the only president representing a U.S. university. The meetings were exhilarating and a bit surreal. We were masked, bottles of sanitizer were everywhere, and the presidents from Asian, African, Latin American, and Canadian universities participated remotely while it was the dead of night or the wee hours of the morning in their time zones. The strengths and weaknesses of our digital tools were evident – remote participation WAS meaningful but that couldn't make up for the fact that some of the best conversations happened during coffee breaks, dinner on the veranda, or on a hike in the local alps.

Our discussions, at times heated, focused on the power AND responsibility of universities. We examined data showing that public confidence in science had grown as a result of the critical role universities played during the pandemic. We deserve to take a bow and pat ourselves on the back for what we have accomplished. But, the pandemic related challenges that still lie ahead -- vaccine hesitancy, the contagion of mis- and disinformation, and the widening equity gap -- will be even more vexing because they require not only better collaboration across the academy, but better collaboration and stronger networks between the academy and the communities we serve.

Changing times require innovation and re-invention. But our purpose and mission are clear, as is the urgency underlying our need to carry it out. As I am writing in a volume with my conference colleagues — the erosion and fracturing of traditional diplomatic power structures make global research universities like ours, with their highly concentrated brain power and ready made networks, critically important conduits for the free flow of ideas, innovation, and people. We are often better able to negotiate sensitive topics and issues than traditional channels of diplomacy. Knowledge diplomacy, which is centered in our institutions and research centers, has become a powerful force, if not the most powerful force, for problem solving on a global scale. And we can rise to that challenge and produce the knowledge needed to create more and better evidence based policy — on healthcare, education, the planet-saving work of clean energy and climate change, artificial intelligence, transportation and, and, and..... but in doing so we must take care not to replicate and reinforce existing structural inequalities. When policy deliberations are made by technocratic experts behind closed doors, rather than with the participation of the full set of community stakeholders, democracy is weakened.

Solutions to the next set of global challenges will require more porous boundaries between universities and the rest of society — something that the open design and glass expanses of the new Burke and the

new Hans Rosling Population Health building on the Seattle campus, so clearly communicate. As does the new corridor to our campus from the U District light rail station with the Welcome Center we are hoping to build at that entry point. Our Tacoma campus lies at the very heart of the city and has played such a role in revitalizing their downtown. UW Bothell is right off the intersection to two major highways that connect the east and west side of our region and is co-located with Cascadia college. Together they are revitalizing that area's wetlands and making them accessible to the public. And in May we're slated open a new building in Spokane where, together with Gonzaga University, we will be training medical students, nursing and health science students and physician assistants who can meet the growing healthcare needs around our WHOLE state, including for those living in rural areas.

Real, lasting change at scale will require us to work more purposefully and deeply with our community partners — and with foundations, national, and international governmental and non-governmental agencies, and yes industry partners too. Universities like ours are best equipped to play a role as an honest broker between their, at times, competing interests. This is what future leadership will require of us, and of our graduates. And that work must begin at home, within our own universities and communities.

We have undergone – and are still enduring – a profoundly traumatic event, a slow-moving disaster that unfolded day by day, in ways both mundane and life-altering. The unrelenting nature of it was deeply corrosive to our individual and community well-being. Despite – or because of – the heroic work that so many did to keep honoring our public mission with purpose and persistence, we all have healing to do. The need to heal ourselves, our communities, and the systems that have created such deep inequity in the first place, can feel overwhelming. But we share a common purpose and together, we can do this. One day and one step at a time, we can rebuild in ways that allow us to both honor the beautiful vision of our past that is still unrealized — with liberty and justice for ALL — and that acknowledges and moves beyond its mistakes and yes, atrocities.

As we chart the course ahead, with so many unknowns and uncertainties we will approach that work with compassion and grace, and a clear sense of purpose, urgency and resolve.

It is my immense privilege and honor to be part of, and to lead, within this truly amazing community. Thank you, all, for the incredible contributions that you have made through this tumultuous time, and thank you too for pushing me. Although it won't always feel good, it is welcome and necessary too. The page is turning now and together we will write the next chapter.