

Rethinking Southern Oregon University

Good afternoon. Thank you all so much for coming out this afternoon. I know how busy everyone is at the beginning of the year. It's great to see you all.

A new academic year is always exciting. There is a wonderful sense of renewal, a sense of promise. We meet new staff, faculty, and students—and we look at our own work and lives to assess what has been going well and what we want to do differently.

For me and for other newbies to campus, we are learning our way around and learning new things. After a three-year absence from the west, I am re-learning how to park on hills. I'm learning not to be surprised when a deer presses its nose against my window. I've learned what to do when the basement floods in the president's house—and learning where to buy deli food while all the pots and dishes are in moving boxes.

I have quickly learned what an amazing group of people work in the facilities area—Stuart Corns, Rex Hendricks, Skip King, Leon Crouch, Richard Lee, Jahred Fuhriman, Duane Deal, and others—these folks have been phenomenal as we've have been moving into a new house just as the academic year is beginning. Also John Stevenson has worked through hurdles and obstacles to ensure I am technologically connected to the world. I am grateful to so many people who have made this transition easier.

I've also had some very special experiences since I arrived on campus early in August:

- On three different occasions in the past two weeks, new students have told me that I'll be getting to know them over this coming year. They have come here as freshmen already intending to be engaged in the life of the campus. I have **never** had this happen to me before—and it shows that students coming here really do expect to be engaged. **We need to nurture those expectations.**
- I met a number of parents during freshman orientation—and they were all incredibly excited that their students were coming to SOU. Most significantly, one after another told me about how their student wanted to come here because he or she had connected with specific faculty members. Once again—this has never happened to me before. **Faculty-student connections are a major strength of this university that we need to celebrate and nurture.**
- I also toured Ashland and Medford with Joe Graf, Josie Wilson, and Eric Dittmer—and met students, faculty, and community folks who have been working together on environmental issues in this region. The commitment I saw that day was outstanding—and so are the positive environmental changes faculty and students are making to our region.

These and other experiences since I've been here evoke a common theme for me. There is so much energy here, so much excitement—a **desire to be involved, to be connected.** People are

thrilled at the opportunity to live, work and study here—and they want to share their delight and energy.

This kind of positive energy does not come automatically. It comes from decades of people working to create a **livable community** and a **student-centered university**. From the vision to create a Shakespeare festival to the vision to create an arts center and expanded library, to a vision for a partnership with RCC in Medford, to create learning centers in Deer Creek and at Crater Lake. As a new president, I am walking in the footsteps of former presidents and in the footsteps of hundreds of faculty, staff, and students who have inspired and developed SOU and Southern Oregon itself through the years.

Of course, if this were all the news out there right now, I'd be out dancing in the streets—and maybe you would be too. But we do have challenges. These slides give an overview of some of our issues. You can view them later, if you wish, on the president's web site.

- **State appropriations compared to other resources [slide 1]**

We are a **state-located institution**. About 17% of our resources come from the state—and expenses are rising in all areas. Oregon is 48th nationally in terms of percentage of state support for higher education. Our resources come primarily from student tuition. But when tuition goes up, enrollment tends to go down. So, **unless we address enrollment and budget issues squarely and aggressively**, we will find ourselves in a cycle of decline from which we might not emerge.

- **Utility costs [slide 2]**

We are trapped in a revenue-static environment: General Fund resources are more or less fixed; tuition growth is constrained by the Legislature; no other significant infusions of cash are likely, but some expenses like utilities still go up. We can conserve, but we can't eliminate many of these costs.

- **Student FTE compared with admin/classified and professorial/other teaching [slide 3]**

We have lost 558 student full-time equivalents since 1999, but our staff and faculty numbers don't reflect that decrease. We have more majors and programs than we had a few years ago. Our new programs are helping to attract new students—but we need to **not** do some of the things we have been doing—and rethink the things we really need to do.

Our budget picture is serious. If we keep spending at the rate we have been without receiving more revenue from the state or from tuition, we will have gone through our small fund balance within a year or two and be several million dollars in debt. It takes almost 100 more students taking 12 credits per term to make up a \$1 million shortfall—so increasing enrollment to 5000 students or so is very important to our fiscal good health.

- **What we have been doing so far [slide 4]**

To survive, we have been doing these things:

- Moving money from the self-support areas of the university;
- Eating away at our reserve;
- Making temporary and opportunistic cuts that whittle away at SOU services.

We need to decide—strategically—which services we need to preserve and then fund them appropriately. We need to make hard choices about our aspirations; we need to decide what we can fund and what we cannot. We need to re-think the university.

We have already cut a lot of the non-salary areas, reducing supplies and services and other budgets. We now need to review academic programs to see where and how we can do things differently. We need to review processes throughout the university and see where we can be more efficient. We need to convince the Chancellor and Board in November that we have a plan for recovery that isn't based solely on hopes that enrollments will increase.

So, very clearly, SOU is at a crossroads. All over this country, smaller public liberal arts universities are struggling with the issues we face. Some institutions have more help from their states than we do. Some have been allowed to—or forced to—raise tuition significantly. Others have approached the problem by redefining who they are and where they are going. They have improved their retention and graduation rates. And they have weathered budget cuts and enrollment declines by realistically sizing their enterprise and its spending. This is the approach SOU needs to take. We need to "right size" SOU for its mission and its resources. We need to re-think.

The Oregon University System is launching an aggressive lobbying campaign for this legislative session to garner better support for universities during the coming biennium. I am pleased with the vision and the effort that the system is putting into this effort. However, even if the legislature looks more kindly on higher education, we still need to re-envision our priorities, reorder our fiscal responsibilities, and reposition our academic enterprise so that we keep the promises we have made to a new generation of students.

We also need to re-think the budget process itself. We need a flexible and rational budget system that aligns with priorities and with fiscal realities. We need better documentation, targets for items such as student credit hour generation and class size, time frames for planning, and processes that support thoughtful, strategic decisions.

We need better budget communication. People should know more clearly what our situation is and what is needed to improve it. I'd like to see a consultative budget process—not a budget that just "happens" to people. We need to make sure that people managing budgets throughout the university have the training and the information needed for them to do a good job. And we need to create a system that is consistent from year to year so the rules don't change and people aren't taken by surprise.

And we must do all this while staying true to ourselves, to the core values of SOU—and do it without losing our energy, momentum, and enthusiasm for the academic enterprise.

There is much we can do to break the downward cycle, and we are doing a lot of it already. This past spring and summer faculty and staff throughout the university participated in effective recruitment and follow-through with prospective students. As a result of this collaborative effort, we have a larger number of new students this fall—and these are students that can and will be successful at SOU. I want to thank everyone who helped with this impressive effort.

We are participating in the nationally recognized Foundations of Excellence program that will enable us to evaluate how we approach the first year and how we can do better. Building a coordinated first year experience to engage our students and keep them through graduation involves unprecedented cooperation among all our areas. **Every one of us has a role in recruitment and retention.**

With Jonathan Eldridge's assistance, we are initiating academic interventions to help students who are struggling.

We have instituted a Career Services program to connect our students early in their academic careers to internships and to jobs after graduation.

We are revising our residential life experience.

With Jim Main's help, we are streamlining and introducing best practices into business services so that our students and all of us get good service as a part of being in the SOU community.

In only a short time on campus, Barbara Porter has done a phenomenal job of rethinking the many pieces of communication that go out to prospective students and redesigning our website. You can view the test site at web1@sou.edu. The new site will launch October 31.

We have an excellent New Faculty Orientation, spearheaded by Kay Sagmiller and Paul Steinle, that reinforces our mission and commitment to students and to learning.

As all of you know, we implemented a brand new freshman orientation this fall. This massive effort spearheaded by Jonathan Eldridge required the support of a large number of faculty, staff, students, and community members.

- Laura O'Bryon coordinated the entire event. She did the work of several people.
- Lynn Lane did the bulk of the work on the new student handbook, as well as all of the details for orientation.
- Bill Smith—on board less than two months—coordinated his staff for both check-in to the halls on a new and different timetable, and provided great menus for multiple daily meals and events.
- Leon Crouch ensured countless set ups and moved literally tons of materials around campus throughout the weekend.

- Preston Mosier made sure the AV needs of multiple events worked perfectly and were set well in advance.
- Mada Morgan, who coordinates the university seminar, as well as many other faculty infused a substantive academic element into freshman orientation—an event that at many universities is simply a weekend of "fun and games."
- Deb Myers started at SOU in July, but she managed to coordinate the entire Civic Engagement Saturday in that time frame. I spent a few hours in Lithia Park pulling ivy with new freshmen—and couldn't believe how much energy, enthusiasm, and pure excitement they had. (They pulled a heckuva lot more ivy than I did, too.)

Student responses to the civic engagement activity have been incredibly positive. One student wrote: "I was somewhat leery of just what exactly my 'community involvement opportunity' would entail. . . . However, once I was actually out in the field, helping the farmers, as well as assisting my fellow students, my attitude toward the whole project changed completely. I was actually disappointed when the day ended. I now have a desire to volunteer with this farm, outside of any school project. I feel as if everyone involved with this project is providing an invaluable service to the community, and I feel very grateful to have been a part of it."

Through the efforts of many, we have established a freshman orientation that sets the stage for academic engagement, civic engagement, and personal interactions between faculty and students. I can't thank everyone enough for this outstanding effort.

This year other significant work will continue as we rethink SOU.

Reaccreditation teams with the leadership of Earl Potter and Charles Lane have been working to lay the groundwork for an accreditation site visit next fall. As you know, the self-study process is intense and painstaking--and involves work on all of our parts. However, it will enable us to look inward and offer honest assessments of what is and isn't working in our teaching, in our programs, in our services, in our facilities, and in our dealings with students.

This accreditation work along with the Foundations of Excellence initiative **will be the framework** for a University-wide planning process that I hope to launch within the next calendar year. That process will be collaborative and visionary—and will help us build a strong long-term plan for success. I want to see the entire campus participating in a dialogue focused on who we are, how we are engaged intellectually and civically, how we nurture diversity on our campus, and how we can deal with the inevitable cost-cutting process. This will be our opportunity to think globally and locally, to think about all the elements we can use to ensure better institutional recognition and stronger positioning for SOU in Oregon and nationwide—while also ensuring that we are more fiscally healthy.

My hope and plan is to work with all of you in a collaborative way to envision the SOU for the next decade. My hope also is to help create a learning environment that has some key characteristics we should all value:

- A campus that is **purposeful and intentional** in promoting learning, academic excellence, fiscal responsibility, and student success. **SOU needs to be about excellence**—and about supporting students who aspire to learn.
- A campus that respects **diversity**. SOU should be a leader in nurturing diverse voices and enabling people from varying perspectives to flourish and learn together.
- A campus that promotes **justice and fairness**.
- A campus that is **committed**—to students, to its employees, to the community.
- A campus that is **communicative**—where silos are broken down and people talk to each other and work with each other
- A campus that is **celebratory**—that honors as well as supports and promotes success. I see so many wonderful things happening on this campus—and I very much want to see us do a better job of celebrating the students, faculty, and staff who are making SOU such a wonderful place.

From each of you, I ask patience as we script a better future for our University. I ask that you infuse your passion for what you do with our passion for a viable University. We need a **communal** passion for excellence at SOU.

I ask that each of you help us re-think, reshape and redefine SOU. In the end, we will have done it together. And our legacy will be a strong, financially sound, and excellent Southern Oregon University—no longer a “hidden” but a very well-known gem in higher education.

I’m not someone who quotes a lot of people when I speak. But I do love the words of our great American philosopher, Gracie Allen. She said, “They laughed at Joan of Arc, but she built it anyway.” We are going to rebuild SOU—and the work we do will transform the lives of everyone touched by this wonderful university.

Thank you again for coming this afternoon. I look forward to working with you in the coming years.

Mary Cullinan
President