

President Allan Belton
Fall Conference Address
September 3, 2019

Good morning everyone, and welcome to the 2019-20 academic year.

This is my third time delivering this address and I am honored to be representing all of you as PLU's 14th president. This year, I asked a number of folks what they most wanted to hear in this year's address. They told me that you want to get to know me a little better and what drives my approach to the presidency, you want to hear an honest assessment of the challenges we face and you want to hear a clear vision for PLU's future.

That first item is the one I find to be the most challenging. I can only imagine that you have seen and heard enough about me - and as you may recall from last year's address that featured powerful video vignettes from faculty and staff - I prefer to make the presidency less about one individual and more about the people that make PLU so great.

In thinking on this, I sought some middle ground - so rather than talking about me specifically, I thought I might share a little about my family so that you might have some perspective of what forces molded the person I am today.

And, what better way to begin than sharing a Belton family portrait.

Take that in for a minute.

That angelic-looking kid, front and center - and looking very dapper in a baby blue turtleneck, red sweater vest and plaid pants - is me.

This photo was taken in December of 1973 - I was seven years old.

If this were the only picture you ever saw of my family you might think - well that is the perfect American family. Mom, Dad, four sons, four daughters - so happy and well adjusted, and so... very... stylish.

Allow me to let you in on a little secret - this is the one and only time we ever sat for a family portrait. My parents married in 1946 and welcomed my oldest sister Karen in 1947 - so between May of 1947 and today - my family looked like this exactly one time - at a JC Penney photography studio in Yakima Washington.

The other 26,400 days we were a very different family than what you see in this snapshot.

Being part of the Belton Bunch was, I suspect, not unlike your own family experiences in many ways. Ours may have been larger than most, but we are a fun and loving family, for sure.

My parents were born one year before the start of the great depression. Theirs was a gritty existence. They worked very hard, for very little their entire lives, neither finished high school, and yet they always did their best to provide for us and raise us to be good people - and for the most part they were successful.

But like all families, we have faced our challenges along the way.

My mom collapsed while walking along the railroad tracks in Granger, Washington, while pregnant with my sister Cheryl and was one of the first people to have a successful brain surgery at the University of Washington in 1950. With my parents' extended family nearby to offer support, my Dad was able to drive back and forth every day after working in the fields to be with my Mom in Seattle, returning in the middle of the night so that he could be with his two and three-year-old kids every morning back in the Yakima valley. After months of hospitalization, my Mom miraculously pulled through -- and thank goodness, because she went on to deliver baby number three and five more (including me).

Years later, my Dad's truck overturned on black ice in the Blue Mountains of northeast Oregon and he broke his back. The primary income earner in our family was bedridden for weeks and unable to return to work - and with no medical insurance, throwing the family into financial crisis. By that point the oldest siblings were in their twenties, married, working, starting families of their own - and they rallied around my mom and dad - helping with bills, chores and taking care of us younger kids.

Over the years, members of our 'perfect American family' have faced financial crises, divorces, loss of loved ones, alcohol and drug addictions, serious illnesses, hunger and even homelessness.

Like all families, we have argued, fought, held on to grudges and differed on political and social issues. We've struggled with personal biases, laid blame, stopped talking to one another - and at times just not really liked one another.

But at all times, we have loved one another and when we have been confronted with the worst of times, we have been at our best as a family - that is what has sustained me and allowed me to be resilient, to seek the help I need and offer help when needed - to thrive.

Today, both my parents are gone - but we are now a family more than 70 strong - made up of teachers, police officers, farmers, musicians, stay-at-home parents, students, blue collar and white collar workers and one unexpected university president. Some conservative, some liberal. Some straight, gay, non-binary. We exist across the socio-economic spectrum. We still disagree and argue with one another. And when we are faced with a challenge that brings us together in common purpose - we thrive.

PLU is also a large, complex family and in a snapshot, we too can appear idyllic.

We are a family of dedicated, accomplished, and highly committed faculty and staff. We attract smart, thoughtful students and produce smarter and more thoughtful alumni. We are fortunate to be on this beautiful campus and in this wonderful community.

The PLU family is also made up of a diverse group of people with disparate backgrounds, experiences and opinions. Just like any family, we disagree, we argue, we lay blame and at times, we don't talk or listen to one another.

As members of the PLU family, you know that we too are not without our challenges - the state of higher education today is one of sustained crisis. Liberal arts universities across the country are fighting for their very survival. The first step in our plan to survive--and thrive--must be an acknowledgement that this is our reality.

We continue to lack the significant financial resources that many of our peers enjoy, but we all face the same early onset of the largely predictable national and regional decline in enrollment. As I announced at University Assembly this summer, this year, once again, we faced an unexpected twist in new student behavior that has left us solving for yet another budget shortfall - with students depositing late - and in a new twist - registering at a lower rate than prior years. We are also facing small declines in graduate enrollment in some programs (not dissimilar to national trends). And once again, this summer, like many before, leaders from across campus have been working to balance the budget.

- We cancelled the search for the Vice President for Administrative Services, electing to split the division into two groups, Finance under the capable hands of our new Associate Vice President for Finance, Patrick Gehring and the remaining Administrative Services Functions under the equally capable hands of Teri Philips while Gretchen Howell assumes a more direct day to day oversight of Human Resources.
- To support this more efficient structure, Ardys Curtis has been appointed Chief Information Officer.
- We consolidated Institutional Research under the capable hands of Kevin Berg who carries the new title, Associate Dean for Institutional Research and Records, and promoted Kelly Poth to Registrar reporting to Kevin. Karen McConnel, dean of the school of education and kinesiology has graciously agreed to act as our Accreditation Liaison Officer to complete our year 1 report.
- In a partnership between University Relations and the Provost Office we created the Office of Sponsored Programs to directly impact our ability to raise more grant dollars for faculty and student support and other pan-university activities.
- We continue to invest in new programs, program expansions and the recommendations of the Strategic Enrollment Management plan.
- We received the results of our pricing sensitivity analysis in August and continue to assess the implications for future pricing strategy and revenue streams.

As the 10th day of the semester approaches, the day universities report our headcounts, we will have a clearer understanding of our final enrollment numbers and will continue to keep the campus updated on the budget.

Clearly, the work to simplify our organization structures (doing less with less as we discussed last year at this time) and secure future enrollment targets continues unabated. Because of all of you, working toward PLU's fiscal sustainability over the past few years, we have made significant progress at becoming a nimbler, data driven and responsive institution.

But given the state of higher education, I believe our work has just begun. We must transform from a constant state of survival to a shining example of a university that finds a way to thrive by remaining responsive to what is happening today, but also becoming proactive in imagining what needs to happen in the future. To do this, will require a PLU renaissance of new ideas and innovation. Just as the renaissance period in European history was a cultural rebirth marking the transformation from Middle Ages to Modernity, let's dare to imagine a PLU equally transformed.

We must achieve a healthy balance of the continuous improvement we have underway and meaningful, strategic growth. We must seek and implement disruptive change - change that keeps us relevant and vibrant, but change that is built on our strong liberal arts foundation and Lutheran higher education roots and that doesn't compromise the excellence of the academy, our people or our mission.

We are long overdue for a renewed vision and meaningful strategic plan – a pathway for the future of PLU that allows us not simply to survive, but truly thrive.

As your acting president, I commissioned the work of drafting a strategic plan under the leadership of the long-range planning committee and with the help of Dr. Patricia O'Connell Killen. I wanted your input in creating a plan that establishes some lofty goals and sets carefully prioritized strategies - that are actionable, measurable, time limited and with assigned responsibility.

Dr. Killen reviewed strategic efforts from across campus, met with multiple constituencies across departments and received direct feedback from more than 250 faculty, staff, students, alumni and board members. The Long-range Planning Committee has received multiple drafts of the plan and has provided much needed perspective, input and prioritization.

What has emerged from strategic planning work are dozens of potential strategic initiatives based on your suggestions and feedback - and from those strategies, three key themes:

1. **Identity and Messaging:** As we increasingly compete for a smaller pool of qualified students in a region targeted by both regional and national universities – we must do a better job of speaking to our unique **identity and messaging** the value of a PLU education to prospective students and their families with a

consistent and effective comprehensive marketing plan that promotes our strengths and that affirms our contributions and achievements.

2. **Environment and Well-being:** As we continue to attract increasingly diverse students, faculty and staff – we must do everything we can to welcome, support, engage, and retain our best asset – our people, by providing for our environment and well-being by adding or improving student success and wellness resources, faculty and staff development and campus facilities that support inclusive excellence and persistence.
3. **Resources and Stewardship:** As the crisis in higher education persists and families increasingly question the value of a four-year degree – we must grow and allocate resources and stewardship of those resources to fuel innovation in programs and technology that will support the disruptive change (or renaissance) we need to move from surviving to thriving.

The strategic ideas that have come forward in this process reflect a combination of existing ideas, those brought forward in the strategic enrollment plan, department and divisional plans and some new strategies to move PLU forward. Strategic ideas that will see us grow and innovate programs, stabilize undergraduate enrollment while growing graduate and continuing education enrollment. Ideas that will improve the experience of students, staff and faculty. Ideas that the Long Range Planning Committee will work this fall to properly vet, seek input, prioritize, assign responsibility, time lines and metrics.

But we have to be bold and unafraid to innovate if we are going to achieve the disruptive change that is necessary to realize our mission fully.

When I originally asked for the development of the draft strategic plan, I had our next president in mind. My intention was to hand a newly commissioned draft strategic plan to the new president when they arrived on campus, so that they might use it as the foundation for bringing their own unique perspective and bold vision for PLU.

Well – be careful what you ask for.

I am not acting anymore. The Board of Regents tasked me to lead – and you expect more of me than to simply fill an empty chair in the president's office. You heard about my upbringing – I was raised to be there for my family in good times and bad – and to move forward with shared purpose.

I've spent the months since being appointed president considering the draft strategic plan and contemplating my vision of the pathway forward for the PLU family. As we work together to finalize the details of the strategic plan, I would also like to use this opportunity to share some of the bolder ideas that make up my vision for PLU's next chapter. In addition to the important task of maintaining our commitments to the liberal arts and professional studies, global education, purposeful learning, and a residential learning experience, the bold elements in my vision include:

- Prioritizing the wellbeing of our community, so that we have the focus, energy, and relationships needed to engage our strengths and creativity. The centerpiece of this priority is a re-imagining of lower campus including, but not limited to, the creation of a comprehensive wellness facility focused on the health and well-being of students, faculty and staff. Imagine a facility that figuratively and literally bridges upper and lower campus. That brings general recreational workout facilities, student athlete workout facilities, health center, counseling, commuter student spaces and other community gathering space together in the center of campus.
- Establishing PLU as the premier private university for health sciences in the Northwest – building on our strengths in Nursing, Kinesiology, Marriage and Family Therapy, Social Work and Natural Sciences – expanding offerings in undergraduate, graduate and continuing ed programs and investing in facilities for each of these programs as needed to meet the challenges facing public health, both locally and globally.
- Deliver PLU to more students, particularly those in less well-served areas, rural students, and students prevented from choosing us because of ongoing realities of work-life balance, Puget Sound congestion and other demands. To accomplish this we will undertake a major expansion of technology and on-line learning capabilities in the form of blended, low- or no-residency programs with a particular focus on the professional schools - with the potential for early adoption in the school of nursing and the school of business - and without compromising the academic excellence of a PLU education.
- Finally, it is essential that we move forward in earnest on a major, comprehensive campaign for PLU. Such an undertaking will require that I focus my time and resources squarely on sharing the PLU story and securing generous philanthropy from PLU alumni and friends across the nation, to build the endowment, capital and operational resources needed to support bold innovation and change.

Obviously, this is not a comprehensive list of all that we will do to ensure a relevant and vibrant future. In order to move from surviving to thriving we must create and support a culture of continuous improvement and innovation - innovation that responds to and supports all of our students - innovation that brings PLU to more students, rather than waiting for more students to come to PLU.

Therefore, I am announcing the establishment of a Presidential Commission for Innovation and Change (led by Dean Cameron Bennett with a dotted line directly to the president and consisting of one leader each from students, faculty, staff, alumni, board of regents and the community) – empowered to source, develop and bring new ideas forward, make recommendations to the president and provost and assist in the coordination and implementation of approved concepts. You may already be asking questions like...What authority will this coalition have? How will members be selected? Once appointed, what is their specific charge? I will be sharing responses to these

questions and more about the formation and charter of this commission in the coming days.

PLU is a large, complex family. In the coming months and years, as we continue to face challenges – I ask for your help in moving the PLU family forward with bold, shared vision – because when we are a family forged in common purpose – nothing will prevent us from securing a bright future for PLU and generations of Lutes to come.

In closing, I'd like to share another brief family story. In searching through boxes and computer files for that family portrait, I came across an email from a few years ago. One of my nieces contacted me because she was planning a 30th wedding anniversary celebration for my brother Arnie and his wife Angie. She asked for some memories of both since Arnie and I are closest in age, and Angie and I were friends all through school. And at the end of her email she asked a question:

“What one piece of advice would you share for their next 30 years?”

This was my response:

Within minutes of our dad receiving a terminal cancer diagnosis, I stood in the doorway of his hospital room and heard the following exchange between my parents. My dad, lying in bed, said, “Well, what do we do now?” My mom, standing there holding his hand, simply said, “We'll get through this together, just like we always do” My advice...be those people.

We have been through a lot together – and we will go through a lot more. If you are willing to share in a bold vision and see this through together – I will be right there with you leading the charge and PLU will succeed – just like we always do.

Thank you.