Chancellor Mel Netzhammer  
Vancouver Rotary Presentation  
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“Building a Stronger Community through Strategic University Planning”  

In academic circles you’re allowed to call yourself the “new” chancellor or president for 500 days. I’ve officially passed that mark. So, now that I’ve figured out the lay of the land, I feel like I’m in a pretty good place to talk about where I see WSU Vancouver heading.

A big part of WSU Vancouver’s future hinges on the outcome of an academic planning process we launched in the fall and plan to wrap up this spring.

My goal today is to make WSU Vancouver’s academic planning relevant to you. For many of you, it may seem that academic planning is really an internal process, but I think it has everything to do with those of us in this room and in our community. We have certainly approached it as an internal and external process.

Here’s what we know:

• We currently have just over 3,000 students. To meet the needs of Southwest Washington and to provide more baccalaureate-educated graduates that the workforce is demanding, we want to be at 6,000 students by the end of the decade.
• We need to be strategic in how we do that, matching student interest and employer demand.
• We have increased public-private partnerships over the last few years, but our future success will require public-private partnerships. The state will not necessarily be our primary partner in public higher education.

When you consider that 75 percent of our alumni remain in this region to live and work, the impact of WSU Vancouver on local business becomes evident.
• With nearly 10,000 WSU Vancouver alumni, our graduates are in many businesses and every local government.
• WSU Vancouver alumni are also your customers, contributing every day to the local economy.
An example:

- This fall we launched the hospitality business management program in the College of Business. It was part of a short-term planning process.
- Hospitality business management was the most-requested business degree and second most requested degree that we were not offering.
- The hospitality industry has been recovering from the recession quickly and growing faster in this region than it is nationally.
- Leaders in the hospitality industry came to us and said they needed graduates with management and leadership skills and asked us to launch the program.
- A gift from the Tod and Maxine McLaskey Foundation allowed us to hire our first faculty member for the program, which launched in August. That gift made it possible for us to start the program at least a year earlier, probably more.
- Given where we are, I should probably point out that the McLaskey family’s roots are in the hospitality industry and particularly with Red Lion Hotels.
- By adding hospitality business management to our degree offerings, we are working to help solve a business problem in the community. We will make a difference almost immediately. Students in the program are required to perform 1,000 hours of paid internships. Our students will begin working in area businesses spring semester.
- I am confident our academic planning process will create many more stories like this one, and I’ll be eager to share them with you on a return visit. Ultimately, we will have a list of new programs, as well as current programs where we need to refocus or increase capacity. We’ll also have a timeline for adding these programs.

Academic planning will also have an impact on our research agenda. The results of research activities at WSU Vancouver are far-reaching and positively impact our community and some of you directly.

- For instance, our mechanical engineering program is working to build sophisticated robots that work in warehouses, like at Amazon, fulfilling orders.
- Engineering helped Christensen Shipyards expand its business to the wind-turbine blade fabrication market. New hybrid processes were developed in the advanced materials testing laboratory on campus.
The composites used in airplane manufacturing today are very hard on drills. Changing drill bits frequently and replacing tools is a big expense. Engineering is working to improve aircraft assembly by developing a coating for drill bits that will make them last longer.

These are just a few engineering examples. Every discipline has similar relevant projects underway.

The research direction our campus takes will have just as profound an impact on the health of our community as the programs we offer. That’s why we’ve undertaken a robust academic planning process this year.

Let me talk for a moment about what we’re doing. From the beginning, this has been a community-based process. We’ve been working with Penson Associates, Inc., a research and consultation firm that specifically works with universities.

- Many of its associates are former university presidents and chancellors themselves.
- Penson has been advised and supported by a campus committee of 12 staff and faculty.

The goal of the academic planning project is to facilitate a highly collaborative process that will identify areas for expanding academic programs and research at WSU Vancouver. The results will prove useful in setting priorities for hiring, organization, capital and financial planning, fundraising, and marketing and outreach.

- By highly collaborative we mean to include all of our stakeholders—major employers and community leaders, and I know that some of you were interviewed as part of the process. We’ve connected with high school counselors and college advisors, and we’ve surveyed students at Clark College. Obviously, there’s also an internal component, in which faculty and staff provide input.
- The interviews followed a couple of months in which the steering committee and Penson pored over regional economic data and workforce development plans.

Penson has begun to draw some conclusions about what programs are most feasible, projected enrollments and proposed phased implementation of the programs.

In consultation with the Academic Planning Committee, they’ll weigh these findings against WSU Vancouver’s values, vision, mission, and strategic position relative to our peers and competitors. The campus community will come back
together later in the spring to provide feedback. The plan itself will be completed
next fall.

It may seem a little odd that I’m talking about planning at the end of my first
500 days rather than at the beginning. One reason, of course, is that the campus
needed to go through the transition of a new chancellor and chief academic
officer. The primary reason is that we needed to prepare our institution to do
things in new ways.

I have inherited a most extraordinary legacy. Hal Dengerink—a community
leader and a long-time Rotary member—led the building of the foundation for a
great university. Our job—and by that I mean all of us—is to build something
even more special on that foundation. We will do that together. That I get to
lead it is an honor and a great joy.