Chancellor Mel Netzhammer, WSU Vancouver  
Financial Executives International  
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“The Role of the University in the Health of its Community”

Thanks for the opportunity to speak with you today and for your support of higher education.

I want to give a particular shout-out to the student scholarship recipients who are here tonight. Anytime we can be reminded of the importance of a community’s investment in education and an educated citizenry, we should take the opportunity.

My great passion in higher education has been to explore how universities situate themselves in their communities. I believe that universities must be of their communities, not just landowners and not just located in their communities. The American Democracy Project, of which WSU Vancouver is a member, talks about the role of universities as “stewards of place.”

Part of the excitement about being at WSU Vancouver is that this philosophy of engagement is part of the DNA of the campus. I think that’s true of many universities, particularly in the Pacific Northwest, but our campus was built with that in mind. With almost 25 years behind us, those who worked to bring our campus to this region are mostly still around, and they still have high expectations for community engagement and a return on investment. Partnerships are very important to our community and to our campus.

Let me tell you a little bit about Washington State University Vancouver. WSU Vancouver is one of four Washington State University campuses, with the largest in Pullman and two other urban campuses in Spokane and Tri-Cities. Our enrollment is just over 3,000 students, mostly undergraduate, but with master’s and
doctoral education provided on the campus. The average age of our students is 26. Ninety-five percent come from the region and 75 percent stay here. We share the research-intensive mission of WSU, so research expectations are high for our 150 faculty with Ph.D.s. Our campus, which is about 7 miles north of the Columbia, situated on 350 mostly wooded acres, was established in 1989 when the Washington legislature decided to create the branch-campus system.

Back to this notion of partnerships: I believe that partnerships are essential to the future of higher education. Partnerships between universities and community colleges, between universities and business and industry, between universities and their communities—it’s the way higher education will survive and thrive in the new economy. State funding is not going to reappear in a dramatic way, and we are dancing at the upper limits of tuition affordability, so we will need to explore new models of higher education. There are many ways partnerships can work successfully to meet the needs of our students and our communities, and I think WSU Vancouver is at the forefront of some of those.

Partnerships have the potential to foster economic health in the region through the two primary and traditional paths that our universities have taken: research and the preparation of students for their careers of choice, ready to take their place as active citizens, and committed to the cultural life of their communities.

I’d like to talk for a few minutes about some of the specific ways WSU Vancouver is engaging in the community. Before that, let me comment on the notion of “community” for one second. I was involved in a conversation earlier this week about the community served by WSU Vancouver. I was in a board meeting where people were interested in knowing our specific service area. I think the answer to that is fluid and sometimes a moving target. Legislatively, we were created to increase degree attainment and conduct research in Southwest Washington. We also serve the statewide land-grant mission of Washington State University.
We’re very aware that of the 75 percent of our graduates who stay in the region, most are working on this side of the river. And tomorrow I’ll be speaking at the Gorge Education Summit, a bi-state conference. So, when I think about the community we serve, I think about our broader region, and its growth and health.

Let me talk specifically about some of the things we’re doing at WSU Vancouver:

**Examples from the Instructional Programs**

**MAP**
Three years ago our College of Business started the Business Growth Mentor and Analysis Program, what we call MAP. MAP is a pro-bono, student-conducted analysis and consulting service to small businesses to help them grow. The college works with organizations about 3 years old (for profit and nonprofit) from all industries throughout Southwest Washington and the Portland metropolitan area. The program focuses particularly on organizations in underserved communities. Over the course of a 16-week semester, student teams work with a faculty member. Each team also has a volunteer business professional serving as a mentor. They conduct an analysis of a company’s financial, market and organizational capabilities and create an actionable plan to grow the business.

MAP provides practical experience to students while offering analysis and consulting to small businesses, all contributing to the economic development of our metropolitan area.

After just three years:

- More than 380 students have participated in Business Growth MAP.
- The program has helped 96 businesses in Southwest Washington and Portland.
- Participating companies grew $2.3 million in new revenues
and created 26 new full-time jobs.
• $1.8M of those new revenues and 10 of those full-time jobs are directly attributable to student team projects.

CMDC
Our Creative Media and Digital Communication Program is an applied major that focuses on website and app design, social media and marketing strategies and all things digital communication. Every aspect of the program is focused on community engagement. Students complete digital media projects for local businesses and nonprofits in just about every course. They created the Autovation exhibit at OMSI, and we are in the second year of #nextchapter, the Southwest Washington community read. This year thousands of copies of “Now You See It: How Technology and Brain Science Will Transform Schools and Business for the 21st Century” by Cathy Davidson will be distributed and discussed across Clark County. All of these projects are student led. And as a result, many of the businesses CMDC has worked with are providing student scholarships to the program. And many of our graduates are filling jobs in these same businesses.

Public Affairs
One of the traditional roles of higher education is to prepare the next generation of active citizens. The laser focus on job and career preparation in the 1990s and more state funding directed to support vocational education in the 2000s led most universities to drop citizenship as a priority. I think we’ve learned that we did that at our peril, and more universities are reclaiming that space. At WSU Vancouver, our Public Affairs Program has promoted and supported civic engagement across the university and throughout the community. Our students engage in a variety of community service projects, particularly around policy, as well as engaging the campus community through the American Democracy Project. This generation of students wants to be engaged, and we need to give them opportunities to practice citizenship.
Research
It’s often a fine line when we try to separate student learning from research. Many faculty support undergraduate research projects. Particularly on our campus, where students are overwhelmingly at the undergraduate level, the faculty are committed to writing students into their grants. As a result, many research projects happen in the context of the instructional program. For example, many of the funded research projects in our School of the Environment happen in our community with the involvement of our students.

Engineering
In our College of Engineering, for example, local high-tech firms propose research projects that they would like to complete in partnership with the university. Teams of faculty and students decide on projects that will have the most potential and pedagogical value and then complete them as part of the capstone experience. To date they have completed over a hundred research projects using this model. Some examples:

- Our mechanical engineering program is working to build sophisticated robots that work in warehouses, like Amazon Fulfillment Centers, assembling orders. (Wafertech)
- The composites used in airplane manufacturing today are very hard on drills. Changing drill bits frequently and replacing tools is a big expense. Faculty and students in our engineering school are working to improve aircraft assembly by developing a coating for drill bits that will make them last longer.
- Our engineering program has also just been recognized for research that will make wind turbines more efficient.

Neuroscience
Our Neuroscience faculty, who also include undergraduate and graduate students in their grant proposals, are bringing in about half the grant funding that comes to WSU Vancouver. The research focus of the program is split between hearing and how the brain processes sound, and how the brain responds to
addiction. The faculty are developing research partnerships with Legacy and with OHSU to advance that research. Beyond the high-level research that I can’t begin to understand, our neuroscience faculty are directly engaged in the community. For example, they are working with schools to combat hearing loss that comes from loud music and earbuds.

**Academic Planning: Responsive to community needs**
So far, I have given you some concrete examples of how WSU Vancouver situates itself in our community, specifically to support the region. More broadly, for much of our history, higher education has been focused on solving the world’s ills for our communities, not necessarily with them. There are many examples of this one-way “we will fix your community for you” approach. The model that we need today is one of reciprocity. Those of us in higher education need to engage with those in our communities, and they need to engage with us.

One specific example: We recently added a new program in hospitality business management because industry leaders in Vancouver and Portland told us they needed it.
• Last August we launched the hospitality program in the College of Business. This major is feeding the booming hospitality industry in the region, which is growing faster than the national average.
• It was the most-requested business degree and the second-most requested degree we were not offering.
• Leaders in the lodging and food and beverage industries in the area are looking for employees with higher-level management skills. Those employers worked with us to establish the program, and they have been willing to put resources into hiring faculty and establishing the program.

So, last year when we started our academic planning process, we knew it needed to be a community process. We’ve interviewed 150 business, community and education leaders. We surveyed students in the public schools and at Clark College. And, of course, we integrated the expertise and feedback of our own
faculty, staff and students. The future of WSU Vancouver will be charted by the input and support of the region.

Why is that particularly important? Our campus reflects our community. A majority of our students are the first in their families to go to college. Many of them are supporting families of their own. Many are struggling financially. Eight-two percent of our students qualify for some form of financial aid, and just over half are Pell-grant eligible, which makes them among the most financially strapped. Our students also match the diversity of Clark County pretty closely. We are a commuter campus.

In other words, our students don’t just reflect our community. They are the community in which we do our work. That’s why this reciprocal relationship that we have is so essential. Our campus is about to turn 25. We’re still cutting our teeth, when so many universities are showing the weariness of age. But we face similar challenges. They need to reinvent themselves, while we probably just need to invent ourselves.

We’re in the midst of a turbulent time for higher education. Public trust in the academy is low. Anxiety over the cost of a college education is at an all-time high. So is the actual cost of a higher education. State funding has declined across the country, and tuition has increased at a much greater rate than the rate of inflation. Students are saddled with significant debt, which affects their purchasing power for decades.

As an industry we are criticized for the slow pace of change. In my view it’s a legitimate criticism. We have been slow to leverage technology, and the move toward outcomes-based learning is going on 20 years.

And yet, I stand before you tonight as the chancellor of Washington State University with more passion and more optimism for the work we do than I have ever felt. The generation of students we are educating today is more engaged with their communities than in the two prior generations. They
are more facile with technology than any previous generation. They care. They have the knowledge of the world at their fingertips, and they know how to access it.

They are fundamentally changing the nature of higher education from the dispensation of knowledge to the application of knowledge to solving the world’s problems—to addressing their communities’ needs. I am so excited to be a part of that.

And in the end, that’s why a university must be integrated into its community in every way possible, why we must become stewards of place. If it’s a blurred line between community and university, it’s a nonexistent line for our students. Our path forward to addressing the criticisms directed at our institutions of higher learning and to addressing the great needs of community is the same path.

Every day I count my blessings that I get to lead Washington State University Vancouver on that journey, and tonight I am really excited that I have had the opportunity to include you on that journey.

Thank you very much.