August 22, 2016

Dear Colleagues,

The return of students to campus reminds us of why we came to SLU -- either many years ago, or perhaps just a few weeks ago. We came to share a quest for truth and a love for teaching and learning. We came to share a call to foster the intellectual, professional, and spiritual growth of students young and not-so-young. We came to investigate, to discover, and to collaborate in research and scholarship that will change the world and the people in it for the better. And we came to share a commitment to the distinctive ideals of Jesuit higher education.

During my first year here at SLU, I have learned a lot about who we are as an institution. I’ve listened to your hopes and dreams for SLU - many of your words filled with passion and, at times, with frustration. You can imagine a stronger SLU, as can I - a SLU that is rooted in our Jesuit values and history and is intentional in how these values shape what we do together - with and for our students, our community, and for humanity as a whole.

What I imagine is ... undergraduate students who come to SLU because they are on a mission. They have begun to articulate the change they want to make in the world and have come to SLU because we can help them develop the competencies they need to achieve these goals. Our undergraduate programs are imbued with the historic values of our Jesuit heritage and with the timeless intellectual skills in the liberal arts. Yet we also provide depth of knowledge both in the liberal arts and in professionally-oriented degree programs. SLU is fortunate to be situated in two great cities – St. Louis and Madrid -- each of which SLU serves in different ways as we live our mission. Both our undergraduate and graduate programs have leveraged the rich human, cultural, civic, corporate, and industrial resources that make each city a lab, a field site, and a partner.

I imagine students in professional programs who come to us because we have the reputation for shaping their vocational calling. We have learned how to respond quickly to changing economic needs that serve our students and communities well.

I imagine doctoral programs in select areas in which we have gifted researchers who mentor future scholars who compete successfully for academic positions or who pursue nontraditional opportunities in which their expertise is highly valued.

I imagine a SLU that is known for its interdisciplinary research and scholarship that takes on the world’s most challenging problems. We’ve saved lives by developing vaccines and methods of distribution that assure access by everyone. We’ve developed understandings of human suffering and well-being that provide guidance to living lives of meaning. Some of our research is externally funded; some is not. All of it is rigorous and committed to a mission in which faith does justice.
In all that we do, we support one another, yet also hold one another to the highest expectations for excellence.

Our very challenging contemporary higher education landscape is characterized by costs that often exceed family resources, changing expectations from students and their families, intense competition for students, and declining federal support for research. These challenges make it imperative that this will be a year in which we very intentionally, and collaboratively, reflect on what SLU is and should be as an institution. Based on the results of this examination and reflection we must then make plans to ensure that we are living up to our full potential and providing our students with truly exceptional educational opportunities. And then we must act accordingly.

One opportunity we have to improve our undergraduate programs is to shape a core curriculum that provides experiences for all our students and binds them together with a sense of shared values and common understandings. Using the work of last year's Vision Statement written by the Task Force on Becoming a SLU Baccalaureate as the foundation, we need to articulate specific learning outcomes and plans for creating a set of common educational experiences and courses that clearly enable our students to meet our stated goals. This is important, challenging work - but it is essential to SLU's future. I thank the Faculty Senate for their ongoing partnership on this effort. We will be charging a joint special Task Force to take these next steps. This Task Force will be engaging faculty across campus in this process. We need your input into this plan - and of course, your engagement in delivering a new university-wide core that is distinctive and intellectually engaging for students and faculty alike.

As most of you know, our students are frustrated with what they see as barriers to degree completion. Changing majors is often difficult -- and about 40% of all SLU graduates DO change their majors at some point. The current core curricula in the colleges are part of the problem, but not the only problem. A large number of requirements for the major can also create barriers for students without enhancing outcomes. I ask you to examine closely and critically the requirements in the programs you teach, compare them with similar degrees elsewhere, and consider how they might be carefully tailored to meet the desired outcomes.

We also need to look at all of our course offerings and make decisions about what is of greatest value for our students. Our curriculum is enormously complex. Not only are there large numbers of programs, but within many programs there are multiple concentrations and within those concentrations, multiple tracks. The outcome of this is large numbers of courses with few students in them. This is not financially sustainable.

I believe the changes that we must make to become financially sustainable will also enable us to attract and better serve our undergraduate students. However, I am skeptical about our capacity to recruit larger numbers of undergraduate students in the short run, and the wisdom of doing that even if we could. There may be more opportunities to grow professional programs - particularly at the master's level. We have a very special relationship with the citizens and employers in our region. We can work in partnership with others to help build the area's educated workforce and to
attract revenue for the university. I am asking you to consider carefully whether we are missing opportunities in your areas of expertise and discuss with your colleagues ways of reaching out to underserved constituencies.

Finally, I ask that you engage our new Vice President for Research, Ken Olliff, with your ideas for how we can strengthen research at SLU. In addition to providing excellent research support to SLU’s faculty, he is looking for areas in which there is enthusiasm for collaborative engagement. He has a broad understanding of research and will be working to improve the acquisition of federal research grants as well as engage corporate entities in the region as well as foundations and individual donors.

I look forward to working with you over the next year to reinvigorate and streamline our academic offerings, to consider opportunities for growth, and to improve the logistics of our research operations as well as to be more strategic in our approach. Our ability to accomplish these and other priorities rests, as always, in our willingness to subordinate our individual goals to our shared goals. As I charge you to think and act more holistically about our university, its mission, and its constituencies, know that I will be demanding the same of myself. I look forward to working with and for you as we make this journey together.

Warm regards,

Nancy Brickhouse, Ph.D.
Provost