

## **The Measure of Excellence**

Annual College Address

Dean David Hodge, November 17, 2004

### **Introduction**

Most of us have seen, at one time or another, a copy of the U.S. News and World Report (USNWR) issue with the annual ranking of America's best Colleges. Agree with them or not, these rankings catch our attention. If we are ranked high, you can be sure that we want people to know about it. It lets people know that we are considered to be among the best in the country. But are these rankings and others like them the best measures of excellence? Do they re-enforce our mission and goals, or do they lead us to pursue outcomes that detract from our core mission?

When the UW Board of Deans held a retreat in 2000 — the first time in more than eight years that the deans had spent extended time together — one of our goals was to agree on a common identity across the campus. Despite representing diverse colleges, we were able to agree with remarkable clarity that the University of Washington is, at its core, “a world-class, public, research university.”

This simple statement captures the most critical dimensions of our identity. ‘World-class’ is a statement both of our current performance and our future aspirations - an expectation of the highest form of excellence. ‘Public’ is not merely a description of our financial base, it is a state of mind that reflects our deep commitment to the world in which we live, the world outside of our own walls. It is a measure of accountability that we accept gladly, and it guides our thinking of excellence towards the end of our efforts – how we contribute to shaping a better future.

I would like to take this opportunity to discuss how these two pillars of our identity, the desire to be among the best in the world, and the desire to be accountable to the world, might shape the measure of excellence by which we judge ourselves. I will begin with a brief overview and critique of our most commonly used measures of excellence, suggest how we might think of “the measure of excellence” consonant with our mission and goals for scholarship and teaching, and then propose some steps we can take to help us better achieve the highest levels of excellence.

## **Common measures of excellence**

Most measures of excellence in higher education are internally focused, i.e., how do we compare to others in higher education. The most well-known ranking of undergraduate education is, of course, that done by U.S. News and World Report. In that report, The University of Washington is tied for 46<sup>th</sup> overall, and 14<sup>th</sup> (with Texas) among public Universities. It is no surprise that the top 20 Universities in the country, according to this ranking, are all private universities. The variables used in the ranking emphasize “input” measures that are a reflection of the economic status of universities and their students, including faculty resources, size of classes, SAT scores, acceptance rates, and the like.

A second form of ranking focused on graduate and professional programs relies heavily, if not exclusively, on reputation. U.S. News and World Report, for example, annually ranks some individual graduate programs based entirely on responses to a five point scale (from outstanding to marginal) completed by chairs and directors of programs being evaluated. One of the major short-comings of this approach is the wide range of response rates. In the sciences for example, the rate varies from 31% in Chemistry to 57% in Mathematics.

The National Research Council (NRC) ratings have the widest currency within the academy and are also based on reputation. Although criticized in many ways, they are frequently cited, especially when we fare well in them. In the most recent NRC ratings (and they are, in truth not very recent), 18 of our departments were ranked in the top 30 nationally (out of 25 departments that were ranked at all), 4 in the top 10. Like the USNWR rankings, NRC rankings also suffer from uneven rates of response. However, because they are sanctioned by the NRC, these rankings have been scrutinized even more carefully for bias or misleading conclusions.

Although the NRC ranks three aspects of programs—quality of faculty, quality of program, and program improvement, most people focus solely on the first measure—faculty quality. Even so, the NRC rankings have several limitations. First, not all fields are evaluated, as noted for the College above. Some of our strongest programs are not even included in these rankings. This is especially true of emerging programs in the sciences. Second, for those fields that are ranked, the number of programs measured varies from field to field. There are, for example, 168 Chemistry programs, 185 in Psychology, but only 32 in German and 41 in Linguistics. So what does it mean to rank in, say, the top 25? Third, the NRC rankings are already nine years old since their publication, and more than 10 since the data were collected. And the next set of rankings has been delayed—at least until 2007.

Finally, what is represented by the NRC rankings is primarily opinion—informed and quantified opinion, to be sure, but opinion nonetheless. They tell us what others think about us. And what we have come to know, is that these reputations may reflect factors other than overall faculty or program quality. We are all familiar, for example, with highly rated programs that are well past their prime yet remain highly ranked. We are

also aware of the impact that one or two big names can have on national reputation. Another troubling aspect of these ratings is the strong positive correlation between program size and reputation. A study several years ago (Graham and Diamond, *The Rise of the American Research University*) reviewed these and similar data and tried to factor out size. Their “findings” were striking, with many of the smaller UC schools rising in the rankings once the effect of size was controlled.

A third approach to evaluating academic status is to focus on outcomes, that is, what are the tangible accomplishments of the institution. Faculty awards, for example are one way we measure our value. How many faculty are members of American Academy of Arts and Sciences, National Academy of Sciences, etc? How many have won a Fields Medal, a Nobel Prize, a MacArthur, a Guggenheim or a National Book Award? We fare well in such an accounting. The College of Arts and Sciences has been home to as many as six MacArthur award winners at one time. Leadership in national societies also reflects the standing of our faculty. For example, remarkably, within the past two years, three of our faculty in the social sciences - Barbara Resnick, Vicky Lawson, and Margaret Levi - have served as presidents of their national societies. All of these awards and honors speak to the high quality of the faculty and the esteem in which they are held by their peers, those who, presumably, know their work most fully.

Research dollars are another lens through which we can view our success. For many years, the UW has been the second leading university in securing external federal funding, and this coming year we may pass the **billion** dollar mark for all externally funded research. Much of this funding is from NIH and hence the Medical School is responsible for the lion’s share of these awards, but Arts and Sciences fares extremely well, this past year topping the \$100 million mark for funded research awards. These dollars are awarded through a very vigorous review process to support the most promising research. Continued success in this crucible speaks very highly of the work that is being sponsored. But not all fields have significant external funding and some have virtually none.

The influence of our work is yet another way to measure excellence. In many fields, citation indexes are sufficiently robust to allow one to make reasonable inferences about the impact and value of a scholars’ research. Articles with many citations are likely to be of greater significance than those with few citations.

A more recent entry in the ratings game is Shanghai Jiao Tong University in China, which ranks universities internationally based on a formula taking into account “quality of education” (alumni winning major awards), “quality of faculty” (faculty awards and citations), “research output” (articles published in Nature and Science and citation indexes), and “size of institution” (academic reputation in respect to institution size). This approach tries to be more “objective,” by considering various hard data related to outcomes and weighting them and also attempts to address the issue of size. It ignores large parts of what we do (arts and humanities, e.g.), however, and it also considers an institution’s historical success and not just where we are now. Worldwide, in this survey

we ranked 20<sup>th</sup> this year. A new Nobel Laureate, Linda Buck, an Arts and Sciences grad, will help in next year's assessment!

### **Moving to the next level: the measure of excellence - and action**

I do not mean to minimize the value of rankings, awards, and publications. They tell a lot about our faculty and our institution, certainly, with respect to our peers. But given their limitations, it seems to me that they cannot measure many of the qualities that are most essential for a world-class public research university, nor do they necessarily point us in the right direction. Indeed, it can easily be argued that the pursuit of higher scores in many of these rankings, especially those based on inputs and reputations, may divert us from our "world-class public research university" mission, which in my mind is more about aspiration than it is about competition.

I ask you all to think back to your early years at the UW. For some of us, those early years are practically ancient history. For others the memories will be fresh. Can you remember what qualities drew you to the UW and to academia? I suspect it had little to do with rankings in magazines. For most of us the attraction was the opportunity to have an impact, to make a difference, to use our knowledge, passion, and curiosity to understand and explain the worlds around us so that the future would be richer in knowledge and better for our children and grandchildren.

Is this thinking idealistic? You bet. But I believe that such thinking is also *realistic*. These are the motivations that serve well those twin pillars of excellence and accountability. They are merged in the simple notion of impact, in that we aspire to generate scholarship and creative expression that make a difference to our fields of study and ultimately to the world around us.

If impact is our ultimate goal, how do we go about thinking big and long-term, about thinking strategically, **about imagining what we might do without first thinking of the limits of what we can do?** It is a frame of mind that relentlessly and ultimately seeks to understand issues of consequence over the long haul. It will lead us, as President Emmert said recently, to take on those questions that other universities either can't or won't.

We can never be certain of what our actions will ultimately produce. There is an inherent tension between strategic research goals that lay out clear expectations and the sometimes serendipitous results that come from efforts unfettered by such expectations. Some of our biggest dreams have ended in failure while many of our most important discoveries have been surprises - an inexplicable outcome to a routine experiment, a passage in a text long forgotten, a pattern in data that reverses our thinking. Yet we can maximize the possibility of having an impact by choosing to think long term about our goals, and to create or encourage conditions that are more likely to generate the outcomes we want. We can think strategically, and we can make investments in specific areas when the conditions are right (leadership, funding, leverage, key ideas, etc.) as we have done in

areas as diverse as the Simpson Center for the Humanities, the Photonics Science and Technology Center, the NICHD Population Center, and Digital Arts. Above all, we can set our sights high and imagine how our work can make a fundamental contribution to the future.

In a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Steven Tepper offered what I believe is an excellent starting point for nourishing those conditions that are most likely to result in research and teaching that has an impact. He focused on one core issue - creativity - as the centerpiece for innovation that matters. He proposed, in the abstract, that we might even create a ranking of "the most creative campuses" that would evaluate five conditions contributing to creativity.

- **collaboration** - Creativity thrives within teams and collaborative circles. Creative people feed off the energy of others.
- **diversity** - Creativity flourishes in diverse environments where there are adequate opportunities for cross-cultural exchange.
- **interdisciplinarity** - Many of the most important scientific discoveries in the modern era have happened at the borders between disciplines.
- **time and resources** - Most so-called epiphanies do not happen as the result of luck. Creative people need time to develop their ideas and prepare to recognize the big idea when it comes.
- **tolerating failure** - Not all ideas will succeed. We need to encourage scholarship at the edge. When I was a program officer at NSF, we were given instructions to expect a 20% failure rate. Learning to take risks is important for both students and researchers.

This list is not exhaustive, but it's a good starting point for important discussions about how to create the conditions that increase our ability to engage in the most significant of scholarly and creative endeavors. I would add three additional elements that strike me as critical to the creative university [and invite you to think of others]: ambition, vision, and long-term strategic thinking. These are each important in themselves, but they also tie directly to being 'world-class' in outlook. The most creative universities will be those who think most ambitiously about the kinds of challenges they can tackle. Vision comes through thinking both comprehensively and long-term. Ambition drives us to think about how our research connects to others; vision unites these diverse connections into a comprehensive view of what our work might accomplish, if successful. In order to do that we need to think strategically and long term. Tepper talked about having time to take on our projects. That is important, but it is not the same as thinking long-term, of imagining how our work might evolve over a longer time horizon.

So if excellence means taking on scholarship and learning that has an impact, and nourishing the conditions to yield a creative university that is central to that outcome, **how then, might we operate differently in the College to take us to the next level?** Let me be clear, it is not that we do not ask this question on a daily basis. Our relentless desire to achieve ever higher levels of excellence constantly prods us to seek new and better ways to operate. But the challenges we face now, I believe, require a more intense

focus on this question. In order to stimulate college-wide conversations, let me suggest four areas that we might want to consider in the months ahead: **transforming undergraduate education, faculty hiring, building research clusters, and academic and administrative re-organization.**

### **Transforming Undergraduate Education**

The College of Arts and Sciences has responsibility for the education of nearly 22,000 undergraduate students. They are the focal point for a lot of our energy, and their experience – and success – is a major focal point for the broader community. Thus, it is imperative that we take this responsibility “to the next level,” both for its own sake and for the sake of our research enterprise. We must seek excellence in all we do. In my annual addresses in the past two years I have discussed critical dimensions of this transformation, including a renewed and more progressive articulation of our liberal arts and sciences education (with an emphasis on critical thinking, communication, creativity, and citizenship) and the transformation to a learning environment (which is inquiry driven, student-centered, and active). In the latter case, this transformation stands to dramatically improve student learning, to better utilize resources and new technologies, and to better align undergraduate education with our core research identity. Given the emphasis on these issues in the past two annual addresses, I won’t explore them further today. But let us be clear on the central importance of the transformation of undergraduate education to our quest for excellence.

### **Faculty Hiring**

With 65 percent of our budget devoted to faculty salaries and faculty responsible for the academic standards of the College, no decisions figure more prominently in our future than the hiring of new faculty. While we have improved the strategic thinking behind new appointments in the past few years, conversations over the dinner table this fall with chairs and directors have made it abundantly clear that our procedures unintentionally encourage short-term and isolated thinking in the development of hiring plans. So let me suggest a few ways that we might change that.

- ***Longer-term hiring plans*** - We currently ask you for requests for hiring each year. On the positive side, we do not tie a request to a specific vacancy - all departments can make a request whether or not they have a vacancy - and we expect the request to fit into the strategic vision of the department. On the other hand, we can typically fill only one or two positions in a department at a time. Such one-year thinking seriously constrains a department's thinking. This point was vividly brought home to me in the exit interview for the ten year review of Mathematics. Everyone agreed that having a particular type of position was a good idea, and most would support having one of fifty faculty lines devoted to this position, but very few would argue for the position when it was one of only

one or two positions on the table. So the challenge for us, it seems to me, is to invent new ways of creating three- to five-year hiring plans that provide simultaneously for better prioritization and more flexibility. Such an approach would stimulate more long-term strategic thinking within a department and, through the advertisement of multiple possibilities, provide for more diverse hiring pools, higher quality hires (especially for smaller pools), and the avoidance of departmental gridlock over "the next position".

- **Cluster hires** - The nature of collaboration and interdisciplinarity require connections between faculty. We have numerous ways to encourage these connections, but perhaps none so potentially powerful as cluster hires. There are three versions of cluster hires (and their combinations!). In the first version we reserve a set of faculty lines for an initiative that is common across two or more departments. One of the first, and most successful, cluster hires in the College was the Diversity Initiative, in which the social science departments pooled their positions in order to hire a cohort of individuals whose research, in whatever field or sub-field they might represent, advanced the diversity of our teaching and research. The results were exceptional. Not surprisingly, most of those hired, but not all, were faculty of color. Thus, in addition to creating a built-in set of collaborators and transforming the curricula of several departments, we were able to hire a powerful cohort who could also grow from their shared personal experiences. Each of the UIF's that involve the College have had similar results, as did our open competition for faculty who do population research, an initiative that resulted in our successful effort to land an NICHD national population center.

In the second version of cluster hiring, we would seek to link the allocation of related faculty lines and their subsequent searches across departmental boundaries. We have an excellent example of this approach in the searches currently going on in the departments of Communication and Women Studies in the area of critical race theory. The departments are sharing their ads, working collaboratively, and using the presence of the other as an additional attractor for the best candidates. Having longer term hiring plans would certainly encourage more of this type of cluster hire.

Finally, we have cluster hiring within a department. Typically, this has happened more by serendipity than by design, triggered by an unusual opportunity to hire more than the expected single individual when extraordinary quality and the possibility to create a critical mass of people around an important area materialized. A good example of this was our search for an environmental anthropologist a few years ago that yielded the possibility, which we seized, to become one of the leading centers for environmental anthropology in the country by hiring more than the one expected position. We had the right departmental context, it made great sense for this campus with our heavy emphasis on the environment, and we identified an exceptional pool.

So how, then, might we use cluster hires in a more deliberative fashion to create

strategic alliances and critical mass in other important areas? How do we maintain our 'normal' hiring while providing at least some opportunities through clusters to achieve a higher level of excellence in key areas? How do we maintain strong departments while encouraging collaborative hiring?

- ***Improved hiring procedures*** - Utilizing longer-term hiring plans and cluster hires provides greater opportunity for exceptional hires, but improving the processes we use for searches can also contribute. Our best example of improved search processes is the creation of the faculty search toolkit, a joint effort of the College of Arts and Sciences and the College of Engineering. Although focused on producing a more diverse pool of applicants, many of the best practices identified are applicable to all searches and should yield a more 'creative' pool of applicants. More recently another innovation, adding a committee member from a department related to the search, has been introduced in the Humanities. Such a procedure can inject fresh insight into a search process, open greater levels of awareness and understanding between departments, and create possible connections that will be more attractive to our best candidates.

### **Building Research Clusters**

As Tepper noted, time and resources are needed to encourage creativity, especially activities involving collaborative or interdisciplinary work. The University of Washington invested heavily in creating centers to do just that through the University Initiative Fund. Most of the UIF centers we created have been outstanding successes, but they have also been expensive investments. There is no doubt that we can and should continue to develop such large and strategic centers. Indeed, to be at the cutting edge of some fields, like photonics, requires such 'hard' centers. But in this fast-paced world of evolving fields and evolving opportunities, how can we encourage a more flexible virtual coupling of ideas and initiatives? Let me offer a suggestion as a way to stimulate discussion of how we might do this more effectively.

In the Dean's Office, we are often approached by a group of two or more faculty with good ideas for a collaborative adventure. The first request almost invariably is for staff support, and space for the staff and "the center". Given our budget circumstances, both of those are very, very difficult to come by. But even if they were easier to provide, would it be a good idea to proceed in this fashion? The benefits of a physical center are obvious, but does the emphasis on a physical center undermine the flexibility of ideas that we seek? Is there a better way to provide the needed common support?

It seems to me that we could create an identity, clear linkages, and critical mass through "virtual centers". But how do we do that? Leaving it to those interested in a research group to do so seems very inefficient: someone needs to be hired, time and momentum are lost trying to figure out what to do, and the quality of the virtual centers will be very uneven. Would it make sense then, to take some of the College RCR funds and devote them to hiring an individual or two whose job it would be to create and maintain a virtual

center? There is not time here to explore the many possibilities and issues surrounding this suggestion, but I would very much like to see us evaluate the proposal this year. Let me stress that virtual center support applies equally to all research groups, regardless of whether or not they might eventually yield external funding.

### **Academic and Administrative Re-organization**

During a budget crisis in the mid 1990's the College went through a wrenching process of program elimination. Ultimately some programs, but no departments, were eliminated. Our recent budget cuts, and our uncertain budget future, certainly put that possibility back on the table as my dinner conversations with chairs and directors attest. Indeed, eliminating programs may be an appropriate strategy should we encounter further significant budget cuts. It may also be a prudent strategy even if we experience no direct budget cuts, but suffer the continued erosion of budgets through inflation and increased costs. I am quite sure that we would choose a different strategy if we knew that we faced a ten percent cut rather than five unanticipated two percent cuts. Yet the cumulative effect of budget cuts and inflation in the last few years is probably approaching ten percent.

During the past six years, we have experienced four departmental "mergers". I put mergers in quotes because that term signifies only the combining of units; it does not capture the strength that comes out of these unions. These new departments (Biology, Communication, Earth and Space Sciences, and Genome Sciences) have not resulted in significant savings, if any savings at all. But in every case, in my opinion, they have resulted in stronger departments who can "take it to the next level", who can achieve higher levels of excellence because they represent a better form of academic organization to support the reconfiguration of their fields. And they have done so without the infusion of significant new funds. Rather, they have advanced their programs with continuing levels of funding. There are probably a limited number of such new configurations that make sense, but we should all examine this possibility.

In many more cases, the challenge to a department, the challenge within a department, is to give up on programs that are no longer critical to their strategic vision. Sitting in my office and having faced this as a faculty member and as a chair, I am struck by how difficult it is for a department to formally let go of a sub-field or program, even though it is pretty clear that it has a limited future at the University of Washington. So we let it limp along, since it takes only limited resources. But in so doing we allow it to be a distraction and to consume precious resources. How can we learn to think more strategically and critically about the internal organization of departments to better equip ourselves with questions of the budgetary implications of academic organization? How can we stop doing what is not central to our mission or our excellence?

Finally, let me suggest that we need to consider alternative forms of administrative support. The most obvious benefits are budgetary. If we can coordinate and consolidate our administrative functions we stand a good chance of being both more efficient and

more effective. Again, these are not easy decisions to reach, but the stakes are high. Perhaps not as obvious but ultimately just as important, are potential benefits of having two or more, probably smaller, departments share staff and functions. Although this may seem more difficult at first, there is a real possibility that such reorganization could encourage connections and collaborations that will lead to a more creative and successful environment.

## Conclusion

The goal of this address has been to answer the question “**how might we operate differently in the College to take us to the next level?**” But how do we imagine the next level?

I have argued that many of the traditional university and program ratings do not provide an appropriate target. Rather, our goal should be to define excellence through our desire to be among the world’s best, yet in keeping with our deep commitment as a public university to the world in which we live. Thus our ultimate goal is for our efforts to have the greatest possible impact on the world around us; we want our knowledge, our ideas, and our energy to create a better future for this region, for the state of Washington, and, indeed, for the world beyond. We can aspire to nothing less.

How, then, do we connect our goals as a university to our personal, individual efforts? How do we, as individuals, contribute to the University of Washington being a world-class public research university? This question is addressed at the end of *Good to Great*, a book which explores the qualities that lead good organizations to become great organizations. In the end, organizations are made up of people, and it is up to people to make their mark in and through great organizations.

*When all these pieces come together, not only does your work move towards greatness, but so does your life. For, in the end, it is impossible to have a great life unless it is a meaningful life. And it is very difficult to have a meaningful life without meaningful work. Perhaps, then, you might gain that rare tranquility that comes from knowing that you’ve had a hand in creating something of intrinsic excellence that makes a contribution. Indeed, you might even gain the deepest of all satisfactions: knowing that your short time here on this earth has been well spent, and that it mattered.*

Jim Collins, 2001, [Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't](#)

We are extraordinarily fortunate to be a part of one of the greatest institutions in the world. Our aspirations to be among the best in the world, and to make the world a better place, frame our quest for excellence and give it special meaning. We can do much to improve the conditions that will help us achieve those aspirations. I look forward to exploring the ideas put forward today with you in the year ahead.

