

Office of the President

ENGAGING THE CULTURE. CHANGING THE WORLD.

[About the President](#) | [SPU's Vision](#) | [Speeches, Publications, & Press](#) | [President's Bookshelf](#) | [Photo Gallery](#) | [Contact](#)



[Speaker's Profile](#)

A Strategy for Strength 2008 State of the University Address

September 24, 2008

Philip W. Eaton, President

Welcome to another grand opening of the year at Seattle Pacific University. We welcome our new faculty and staff into our community. We welcome this morning our student leaders, some 260 of them. I told them on Saturday night that I believe we have one of the finest student leadership programs in the country, and they are, without a doubt, some of the finest student leaders anywhere. Welcome this morning to the members of our Board of Trustees who have joined us. We are so grateful for the role played by our trustees in the life of this community.

This is an election year, as we all know so well. Every time I stand up to a podium these days, I feel like I am supposed to launch into a political speech. I wish I had some of those nifty teleprompters, and I am sure I could use the help from all those speech writers. I remember back when I started in this work as a university president, I was invited to stand in a receiving line at some downtown function, in order to be introduced to the crowd. It was an election year then as well, and I said to the person next to me in line, "I feel like a politician." He said "Well, you are. You better get used to it." That was kind of a shocking discovery.

In this election season, I hope we can get thoroughly involved over the next month or so. Some of our faculty have been engaged in a fascinating discussion on facnet about how Christians are informed by Scriptures to think through elections. And all of that is good. Even though it is so hard these days to talk across the political divides without shouting, *perhaps we can model another way as we move into the fall.*

But I used a quote up at Faculty Retreat a week ago, from the great 18th century literary figure Samuel Johnson. It goes like this:

*How small of all that human hearts endure
That part which laws or kings can cause or cure.*

We must be tuned into what our aspiring presidents are saying, and what our lawmakers are doing, but let us remember on this campus that the human heart is bigger than all of that. There are most certainly other things that demand our attention at a Christian university.

We must be tuned into what our aspiring presidents are saying, and what our lawmakers are doing, but let us remember on this campus that the human heart is bigger than all of that. There are most certainly other things that demand our attention at a Christian university.

I want to talk this morning about where I think we stand as a university, some of the incredible things so many of you are accomplishing, and then I want to share some of my thoughts about our challenges ahead and where I think we are headed.

But first let me begin by saying thank you to everyone in this room. With such a complex organization like ours, it takes so many different kinds of gifts for us to fulfill our mission and vision. So, my sincere thanks to each one of you for the part you play.

What a talented, devoted, loyal, and committed group you are. Our team is just exceptional! And I say thank you.

This summer one of our long-serving, hardworking servants among us died suddenly. Dan Gill was our head painter, a prince of a guy, a mentor and coach to many of our students who worked for him, a man who cared about the beauty of our campus — so that we all could serve our students better. We will miss Dan, and we celebrate his life and accomplishments.

As a small tribute to Dan, and in recognition of the great service Dan's colleagues bring to our work, I would like for *all of our plant services staff*, including Don Mortenson, Dave Church, and others who lead this group, to stand and be recognized. Thank you, each one of you, for making your special contribution to our community.

I've had a hard time writing this speech over the last few days. It is very difficult and delicate for me to stand up here this morning and trumpet your successes, which I love doing, and talk passionately about possible future directions

for the University, *without squarely acknowledging the turbulent swirl of our economic world at the moment*. We are living through a very scary time right now, and we must have our eyes wide open. We must trust leaders of all sorts around our country and the world to make good decisions, and yet that trust is hard to come by at times. I'm not sure anyone fully understands what is happening.

We must also be aware of the fear and uncertainty and consternation among our students and among so many of you across the campus.

First let me assure you that Don Mortenson, Craig Kispert, a number of our very savvy trustees, and our many consultants, are monitoring this situation daily, watching carefully how these rapidly changing developments might reach into our own financial structures. *And while there are no guarantees, we believe we are in good shape*. Our financial footing is quite sure, and we move forward into this year with confidence. But we've got to do our work moving forward with our eyes wide open. We've got to marshal all of the competence and savvy we can bring to this situation.

But there is another dimension to this whole thing. I've found myself asking over the last few days what a university has to offer in all of this? We can feel as though we are on the margins of influence and even understanding.

And we find ourselves asking: Is this really a moment to be talking about directions for the future? What will happen to a fundraising campaign as we move forward? How can we think about new programs, and new hiring, or new facilities in a time such as this?

On the practical level, I believe we've got to keep moving, keep planning, keep working at it. We've got to have a plan in place when this whole thing settles down.

But on an even deeper level, it is moments like these that press us hard to articulate the purpose of the university. Who are we? What do we stand for? What is the meaning we have to offer our students and to the world?

I am reminded about a famous sermon C.S. Lewis preached at St. Mary's Church on the Oxford University campus in October of 1939. The Nazis had just brutally invaded Poland, sending shock and uncertainty and fear across the continent of Europe and around the world. *And Lewis felt compelled to ask the question to the faculty and students of Oxford "whether there is really any legitimate place for the activities of the scholar in a world such as this."*

And Lewis' answer is very helpful as we think about our own circumstances. Lewis says, look, here's the deal: *"good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered."* And the university, this University, the Christian university in our case, is precisely the place to shape that "good philosophy."

Our world, and our students, desperately need a perspective on what's going on, an exploration from the unique angles of various disciplines, a digging into the thought and wisdom that comes to us from throughout the ages, a teaching that comes to us out of the Scriptures. Remember, the human heart is bigger than all of this too.

And so as we think about the state of our university this morning, and as we engage in conversation about where we might be headed, I am convinced we must be thinking hard about this larger sense of purpose. We've got to be smart and savvy about the conditions of our world that press in on us, *but our goal must always be to bring hope into the world we serve*.

And the question this morning is "How we are doing?" And my answer is "We are doing extraordinarily well. We are healthy. We are in great shape. We are flourishing."

And then the question is "How can we do our job even more effectively? How should we organize our energy and our resources to accomplish our vision even better?" And my answer is that *"we've got to be thinking aggressively forward, even in the midst of the turbulence of our moment."*

As I think then about the state of this University this morning, I am so very pleased. Aren't you? We've got something to speak into the lives of our students. We have a story of human flourishing to offer the world. We've got something to say. We are clear about our core signatures as a university. Our Christian identity as a community is clear and winsome. *I believe we are very strong this morning*.

We are hitting our enrollment numbers. That's huge. I get the privilege of welcoming some 715 new students, some 205 new transfers, likely to match last year's record enrollment. It looks like about 18 percent of the new class will be ethnic students, a second year of solid enrollment in this important area. These things are all a big deal to us, a big deal to our health as a university.

As many of you are aware, *we just received a \$3.7 million NSF grant for the study of learning in science*. That's huge. I commend [Stamatis Vokos](#) and the whole team in physics and the sciences for this extraordinary effort. *This grant confirms the status of our scientists on the cutting edge nationally of research in the teaching and learning of science*.

By the way, about 30 of our science faculty, under the guidance of [Bruce Congdon](#) and [Derek Wood](#) and [Ben McFarland](#), stayed over for another day and night at [Camp Casey](#), after Faculty Retreat, to imagine where we are headed in the sciences. Our work in the sciences across the board is flourishing and moving forward. And this is huge.

We have exploding interest in our [Master's in Nursing program](#). Both our Biblical Theological Education Initiative and the plans for a [new graduate program in theology](#) are moving forward aggressively, under the guidance of [Doug](#)

Strong and our fine faculty in the School of Theology. Under the leadership of Elaine Scott, our engineering program just received another NSF grant for their good work. Our work out of the Perkins Center, under Tali Hairston's leadership, is receiving national recognition. Our School of Education is recognized as one of the strongest contributors of leadership in our region for the public schools, and they just received a Murdock grant for \$300,000 to create a professional development program for Christian schools. Our School of Business, late in the spring, hosted their second annual Social Venture Competition, with some 40 judges from the business community.

All of this, and so many other things, says we are strong. We are building and maturing as a premier, national Christian university. And we celebrate all of this, and we are grateful for the good work of our people.

But we must also be thinking about the future. *If there is ever a time not to be complacent with our success, it is now.* Higher education in America today faces enormous challenges. We are experiencing a flattening out of demographics of college age students. Our prices and our costs continue to spiral upward, and we must recognize the burden and the challenge this presents to our students and families. And of course who knows the longer term impact of these economic changes on the economics of our business in higher education? We've got to be smart and savvy about these challenges. *We have to sharpen our competitive edge as competition in higher education intensifies.*

Throughout last year, and all through the summer, we have engaged in hundreds of hours of conversation with faculty and deans and staff and students and consultants and trustees. And coming out of all of our discussions, here are some of the thoughts we want to put on the table for further conversation with our campus community this fall and beyond.

First of all, we have tried to step back every step of the way and ask what principles are driving our planning efforts, and here is what I think: This plan must be about vision. It must also be about *students*. It must be about *faculty*. And it must be about *community*.

Our vision calls us to bring hope into the world we serve. That's the vision that guides us. In other words, we want to sharpen the powerful tools of the Christian university to bring hope into the world. We seek to bring the transforming gospel of Jesus Christ, a vision for human flourishing, into the lives of our students, our campus community, and to the far reaches of the globe — as a university.

To fulfill that vision, I have become more convinced than ever that we must focus on that profound moment of encounter between our students and our faculty. We've got to get the right students here, and we've got to support the right faculty here, and we must focus our energies and our resources to support that encounter between students and faculty.

But then we also have to continue to work on community. We operate on the conviction that the best education for our students and the best environment for teaching and research for faculty takes place in community. Community doesn't just happen. We have to devote our energies and our resources always to strengthen Christian community.

And so these are the drivers. Where then, concretely, do we need to focus our resources?

First, we must ask how we can continue to strengthen the faculty. Over the last 10 years we have added 30 FTE to our faculty. But we went to work this summer to study and evaluate our faculty FTE, student/faculty ratio, course load patterns, class sizes, and the rest. Most importantly we examined our deepest convictions about what is important, and we have concluded that we need additional faculty.

Second, we took a look at what program initiatives are on the plate and how we might support them. Though there will be others added along the way, here is what we are focusing on at the moment:

- The Biblical Theological Education Initiative.
- The Global Initiative.
- The Center For Scholarship And Faculty Development.
- The Science Initiative.
- The Perkins Center For Reconciliation.
- The Graduate Program In Theology.
- The Center For Worship.
- Cutting-edge research on learning: through the Brain Center For Applied Learning Research, through undergraduate research in the sciences, and through our focus on learning in the sciences, psychology, and in the School of Education.

Third, we have examined very carefully what additional facilities we need at this moment in time. Out of all the options from our facilities planning over the last five years, and again, out of all of the discussion we have had all across campus, we are now focusing on two new projects: a New University Center, located at 3rd and Dravus and fronting out on the loop, and a New Student Center, located where the Weter building stands at the moment.

The New University Center will house a new learning center for faculty and students, with state-of-the-art classrooms and a home for faculty across the campus; a new home for art, music, and support for theatre; and a new hall for lectures, worship, chapel, concerts, and high ceremony events. We have completely abandoned the notion of a stand-alone building at the corner of Nickerson and Third, and we believe this New University Center, with these combined purposes, is a huge step forward.

How then will we fund all of these commitments, from the hiring of new faculty, to the program initiatives, to the new

facilities. We are crafting a new undergraduate enrollment strategy, projecting some growth in our enrollment. We are looking at our tuition and financial aid strategy moving forward, a critical and challenging part of our economics. We absolutely know we must grow our endowment significantly, and we know just as surely that we must continue in fresh new ways to position our vision and our work nationally.

We are of course shaping a new fundraising campaign and as well looking at a number of other viable sources of funding for these efforts. And finally, we are looking at how we can significantly build a fourth quarter program through our summer months.

I am eager to share these plans further with you. I will try to get something in writing out to the community on Blackboard again, as we did last spring with the whitepaper, and then we will hold various President's Forums and breakfasts and so on. I will be eager to get your insight and questions as we move forward.

Please know this is a very delicate process at the moment. I am eager to engage in ongoing conversation around campus. I am eager to get everything out there, so we can talk together. But we have a parallel process going on with our Board of Trustees, and we can't get out in front of them. Our goal is to keep this as wide open as possible, on all fronts, while at the same time preserving proper order to process and approval.

Last Thursday morning, when the stock market was falling apart and the world was very jumpy and anxious, I was reading from the Psalms, and one of those texts just leaped off the page for me:

*Do not be vexed ...
Trust in the Lord and do good ...
Delight in the Lord,
and he will grant you your heart's desire.
Commit your way to the Lord;
trust in him, and he will act.
He will make your righteousness shine clear as the day
and the justice of your cause like the brightness of noon.
Wait quietly for the Lord, be patient till he comes. Psalm 37.*

I remember some years back when I was in business in Phoenix. We were in the land business, in the work of commercial properties. And we hit a big-time downturn in the early '90s, with market corrections that had all of the language of our current troubles, the worst since 1929, and so on. And it was brutal. Property values plummeted. Construction halted. When you own a piece of property and the market stalls, there is literally nothing you can do. You can't force someone to buy it, for goodness sake.

And I remember going into my father's office, this fine man who was having to endure such market corrections at the end of a long career. I was seeking wisdom, insight, for how to move forward. And he said to me, "Phil, we've got to do two things: we've got to trust in the Lord, and we've got to bust our tails off."

And in many ways that's where we are today. With all of these challenges all around us, we've got to trust in the Lord. Right? There is no other way. But to trust in the Lord and sit on our hands is no way for responsible Christians to act, no way for a great Christian university to do its business in times like these. We've got to bust our tails off.

And busting our tails means being guided by genuine conversation about what we need to do. Busting our tails means being as informed and as savvy as we can be about the challenges. It means bringing competence to our situation. And it means mapping out the future with a clear plan, with clear and honorable purpose. It means sharpening our competitive edge. It means seeking always to be faithful and obedient to God's call on this place for this time. And then it means trusting in the Lord.

And so that's our state of the university this morning. Let's keep talking about all of this. To be sure. But then let's "trust in the Lord and do good."

Thank you all. You're great. All of this is to be continued. May God bless each one of you in the year ahead.

Copyright 2012 [Seattle Pacific University](#). [Web Content Disclaimer](#). General Information: 206-281-2000.

Demaray Hall, 3307 Third Avenue West, Seattle, Washington 98119-1997,
U.S.A.

[Contact](#) the President's Office.