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**State of the University: Life on the River
Fall 2011**

Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for coming today to hear me speak about the state of the university. What state is SOU really in?

First off—we're still doing what we should be doing—helping our students be amazingly successful.

We have so many good news stories. Our student Crystal who graduated Magna Cum Laude in 2008 with two Bachelor of Science Degrees, a double major in Business and Math **and** a major in Psychology. She went on to a position at CDS Publications in Medford and is now a manager. When I met the CEO of the company a week or so ago and asked about Crystal, he said, "She's a star." Of course, that's what we know about so many of our students.

Our student Annie, who was a math major. She's now in the marketing department at Harry and David. When I met the new CEO at Harry and David, she said Annie's perfect for the job. She can think. She can solve problems. This confirms what we know about our liberal arts education—it is the best career preparation you can have.

One more story: Shaun transferred to SOU from community college in Fullerton. He came to Ashland with his family--including his 2 year old son. Shaun volunteers nearly 20 hours per week with ASSOU, working on sustainability efforts. He started SOU's Net Impact student group, focusing on sustainable practices and is working with administrators to get a solar array on the SU. Shaun traveled to Germany last summer as part of his Business program and brought back sustainability ideas to implement at SOU. Shaun says that when he first visited SOU he knew it was his "destiny to come here, learn, and contribute in any way possible."

We continue to transform our students. SOU contributes significantly to our region and our state. But we're also deeply affected by forces around us. So when we ask what state is SOU really in, the answer isn't simple.

At our opening breakfast I talked about how sometimes working at SOU is like going down the wild and scenic Rogue. The ride is beautiful, but white water can be frightening sometimes.

Over the last couple of weeks, I've been thinking about another river experience—this one from my childhood. When I was about eight years old, my parents rented a vacation cottage in the woods of West Virginia, on the Shenendoah River. My family was not at all what you might call out-doorsy, so this experience was a stretch for them.

One day my brother, who was in his 20's, offered to row my mother and me out on the river. We had a lovely trip downstream. But then he tried to row us back. He rowed and rowed, but we kept seeing the same big rock along the bank. We weren't making any progress at all.

Finally, my brother rowed us to shore, and my mother and I walked back along the bank. Tom got into the river and **pushed** the rowboat—the river was pretty shallow and my brother was 6 foot 6, so his head stayed above water as he pushed. We made it back—but that was the only *rural* vacation my family ever attempted.

This story recently resurfaced in my memory. Sometimes it does feel like we're pushing this university boat upriver; we never get to lie back and enjoy the ride. But truly—in the wild environment all around us right now—making progress and keeping our heads above water is actually a triumph. And while pushing a boat upriver is exhausting, it's a lot better than being whisked over the falls.

Our successes are astounding. Our enrollment numbers aren't finalized yet for this fall—but overall we look strong. Last fall we had a record enrollment—and we're over that number this fall. We're probably going to be second highest in the Oregon University System in terms of enrollment percentage increases. Thank you, everyone.

We're doing great—but I can't sound like Pollyanna and say "All is well." We still face incredible challenges.

Over the last three years, the state of Oregon has cut us by 27%—and those were cuts from a very low base. (On a side note, Oregon used to be 48th in state funding—we've actually risen on that list recently as other states have been hit even worse than we are.)

We won some freedom through the passage of Senate Bill 242 last winter—but we won't see many cost savings right away.

We could end the next biennium with a state allocation that doesn't even cover our benefits, much less our salaries or anything else. That's pretty mind-boggling.

We achieved better-than-expected financial stability last year when our enrollments soared. But as state funding continues to erode, we can't charge our students enough to make up for the shortfalls. Many of our students face increasingly difficult times. Their safety nets are breaking.

One new freshman came to see Rick Weems with her family last week. Her parents had just declared bankruptcy. They had to take their daughter out of school. The family just couldn't make it work, even with financial aid.

One of our top scholarship recipients spent a number of years working as an electrician—but his dream was to get a university degree. He came to SOU and received almost a full ride scholarship. This term he had to drop out—he couldn't support his family, at least for now, without going back to work full-time.

I'm afraid our first-year retention numbers this fall won't be what we'd like them to be. We are seeing the students who are staying take fewer credit hours while working more hours. We saw the survey results last year showing the amount of stress many students are experiencing. And many people working on this campus—people who are charged with helping our students face their challenges—are facing family and financial problems of their own brought on by the bad news we cope with these days.

While I'm not Pollyanna, I'm not the opposite of Pollyanna either. You all know Eeyore:

"It's snowing still," said Eeyore gloomily.

"So it is."

"*And* freezing."

"Is it?"

"Yes," said Eeyore. "However," he said, brightening up a little, "we haven't had an earthquake lately."

Despite SOU's version of snow and frost—and some would say earthquakes and tornadoes—we've made tremendous progress. We've achieved financial stability in the face of enormous challenges. We've hired terrific new faculty and staff; recruited, retained and educated amazing students; built exciting new academic programs. We've moved forward on powerful initiatives, such as the Honors College and the residence hall project, which will bring value to SOU for generations to come. Everyone in this room is contributing to our successful initiatives.

I continue to be delighted that we have a functioning **planning** process. Our strategic plan and annual goals help us set priorities and use our limited resources with purpose. I

am so proud of our progress in supporting student success, in creating a healthy campus initiative, in diversifying our campus, in providing more professional development opportunities for faculty and staff, in fundraising for scholarships and other priorities. Having a planning process doesn't mean we are always in agreement, but it does help us stay focused on our values and our mission.

On many campuses around the country—campuses that don't work and plan together as well as we do—on many campuses, deadly cuts are clearly affecting academic quality. The percentage of tenure track faculty on many campuses is going down as more adjuncts are hired. That's not happening here. On many campuses, class sizes are ballooning. Academic programs are being cut. At SOU we've worked hard to maintain our commitment to our primary strategic goal—to academic distinctiveness and quality.

While other schools have cut across the board, on this campus, we have SOAR, we've launched a Distinguished Lecture Series, we're designing an Honors College, we have a campus theme program that has attracted national attention as have our efforts in sustainability and our work in civic engagement. I've been able once again, in part with the help of the SOU Foundation, to provide support for faculty mini-grants. We have hired inspired and inspiring new faculty. We're doing our best to avoid huge class size increases. We're adding programs that look to the future.

We will spend time this year envisioning SOU in 10 years—when we reach our 150th birthday in 2022. What will we look like? How will we achieve what we need to achieve? We know that staying the same is not an option. But **how** will we change? We need to take an honest look at our physical resources as well as our human resources—and the precarious prospects for higher education in this state and in this country.

We have a lot to celebrate, a lot to be proud of. We **are** on the move. I spoke recently with the president of SUNY at Plattsburgh, a university in upstate New York that looks somewhat like us—with about 6000 students. They see SOU as an aspirational school for them. We're more respected outside Oregon than we are at home. We hear that all the time from California parents and students, who increasingly see us as a destination liberal arts university.

I long to be in a world where we see financial as well as “psychic” incentives for all our hard work. I'd love to get everyone's salaries to a reasonable level; to hire all the staff and faculty we need to meet our growing and changing needs as a campus; to better meet our students' significant financial needs.

When students asked me last year what impossible dream I had for SOU, I said I wish students could go to school for free. Can you imagine what that would do for our students, for families, for communities, for our economy? But the reality of public higher education in the United States has drifted—or plummeted—farther and farther from that dream.

Perhaps thirty years from now people will look back in amazement at our hard times—and our resilience—much as people in the post-World War II prosperity years looked back at the Great Depression. How did those folks get through it?

At SOU we can't just hold our heads in despair. And we can't put our heads in the sand. We need to face our challenges as we have done so effectively in the past few years. We have committed in our strategic plan to civic engagement and connecting our students to the region. As part of our commitments, we have to help our students more intentionally connect with future employment.

The death of Steve Jobs last week made me think about the slogan “Think Different.” We need to think hard—and somewhat differently—about our mission as a public university and our commitment to students. We need to realize the level of financial distress and stress that they face. And we must think intentionally about how to help them have a productive future. That means doing all we can to help them stay in school. And it means doing everything we can to prepare them for future jobs. In these extraordinary times, it's part of our role as socially responsible educators to help students plan for their future. And, of course, many of us are doing this already.

This emphasis isn't flying in the face of our liberal arts tradition. As I mentioned, I've been meeting with employers in the region. Like Harry and David, they hire our majors—whether from math, accounting, literature, or music—because they can think. They can communicate.

But we need to connect our students with employers even more effectively than we are now. We need to help our students understand **why** the skills and knowledge they acquire are so important to their future. We all need to be even more intentional in helping students make meaning of their studies. Students need to articulate that meaning to prospective employers.

Our framework for an Honors College includes guiding students toward the creation of a life plan, to develop skills and connections that will help students craft their futures. The liberal arts may be the best preparation for career and life success, but we can't assume our students will connect those dots without intentional work on our part. This may sound

heretical in terms of a traditional Honors program—but we need to be a tad heretical. We need to Think Different.

A public university—**this** public university—THE public liberal arts university of the West—cannot exist in a vacuum. We are all affected by the environment around us. On this campus, we have shared sacrifice—and I know that hasn't been easy for anyone. I know we're underpaid and overworked. I wish I could immediately fix the challenges we face. Yet we continue to accomplish great things.

As you continue the great work you're doing, be inspired by our students. But think about how to help them be successful **after** college. A great example is Tricia, a new Ackerill scholarship recipient. She's a mom with two kids. She's graduating in June with an education degree and teaching credential. Tricia student teaches in Grants Pass—she's been driving back and forth. The Ackerill is a full ride scholarship and she's so excited—she's enrolled in 16 credits.

This story is also about her husband, an SOU grad. Tricia worked to put him through school. An SOU faculty member helped him get an internship—and Josephine County hired him. He's been successful—but we helped him get started.

So now it's Tricia's turn to finish school. Both their lives have been dramatically changed because of SOU. Their success reflects their hard work—but also the work of people here in this room.

So, from my perspective, this is the state of SOU in fall 2011: We continue to succeed despite challenges and adversity. We continue to make our own way, even if it is upstream. We're keeping our heads above water.

Our work isn't easy—I wish I could see it getting easier. But our work is vitally important. With your support and commitment, we continue to thrive and flourish as we make our way against the current.

I can't thank everyone enough. You're a great team. It's an honor to work with you.

Now—please join me for a glass of wine, courtesy of the SOU Foundation. Thank you again.