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Listening and Learning

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Friday October 7, 2016

By Eric Spina

I quietly walked into Sears Recital Hall to catch part of Professor Tony Smith's lecture in a team-taught CORE class, "The Development of Western Culture in a Global Context."

Students were engrossed in a discussion about competing Jesus movements in early Christianity. Many were tapping out notes on their laptops — as were seven professors who team-teach the course from a variety of disciplines. All were listening with rapt attention.

I saw a similar level of engagement and energy in Fitz Hall, where I visited a class in the Master of Physician Assistant Practice program, a highly sought-after degree. Last year, nearly 1,000 prospective students applied for 40 seats. These students *want* to be here, and it shows in their dedication and enthusiasm.

In the Davis Center for Portfolio Management, I met finance students who are thoughtfully investing \$22 million of the University's endowment in the stock market and outperforming some of our money managers. Other students are running businesses on campus, like the ArtStreet Café and The Blend coffee shop. Through the Hanley Sustainability Fund, students are managing real investments in "green" and sustainable firms.

This is just a glimpse of daily life on our campus. I felt the energy, optimism — and the possibilities — as I walked around and observed.

For the past month, I've made three-hour visits to each of the academic units to listen, learn and discover. The deans took me on a tour, we popped into classrooms and labs, Provost Paul Benson joined us for an hourlong conversation with faculty and staff about the University of Dayton's future, and we socialized at an informal reception. My wife Karen often stopped by the receptions to chat and meet the people who make the University of Dayton so special.

At my initial faculty and staff addresses in early September — when I gave a 30-minute speech on higher education and our special opportunity at UD — I promised visits to each of the academic units in which we would begin an extended dialogue. While some might call this a “listening tour,” I view it as essential for a new president to build relationships with the faculty and staff, as well as the beginning of our strategic visioning process. I'm inviting the campus community to imagine a future we will shape together.

What did I learn? I could fill a blue book or two.

I discovered how passionate faculty and staff are about this university. It's displayed in the way they help students find their vocation. It's exemplified in their commitment to the Marianist charism. They feel deeply connected to the University of Dayton and to our students, and that connection is as meaningful to them as it is for our students and alumni.

I learned about our core academic and research strengths, met a host of students and saw both high-quality spaces for learning and research and some that need continued development.

I heard hopes and aspirations, concerns and even a few fears. Affordability and diversity came up time and again as our greatest challenges.

Mostly, though, I heard and felt a sense of optimism and possibility, borne of a deep belief in our Catholic, Marianist identity, nurtured by the excellence and selflessness of our students, and extended by a belief in our mission.

I am optimistic by nature — and even more hopeful about our future after spending 21 concentrated hours immersed in our academic mission. Over the next few months, I look forward to engaging with staff in other divisions. As a campus community, we will continue to grapple with this question, “How will we boldly shape our future and prepare students to change the world?”

Our strategic visioning process will help us navigate through challenging times in higher education, make hard choices and embrace a future as an agile institution anchored in our values, but ready to embrace change and fearlessly pursue some key opportunities.

We have what it takes. We have such talented, hard-working, committed people with a deep and abiding faith in our university.

We can aspire to even higher levels of greatness, relevance and impact.