

## **For and With Each Other**

**Edmund Campion Lecture  
November 30, 2021  
Fred P. Pestello, Ph.D.**

I wish to begin by thanking the Catholic Studies Centre's Award Committee for selecting me as the first recipient of its Edmund Campion Award. This is humbling on two levels. First, it is humbling to be linked in any fashion to a Jesuit saint who is a model on so many fronts — a scholar, an educator, and a man of enormous courage and deep faith — one who gave his life to bring his faith to others. Second, because of my high regard and enormous respect for those SLU colleagues who made this decision. Thank you for this generous honor.

During my presidency, everything of significance that has been accomplished at SLU has been a collective effort. I hope my remarks today will make clear that no one in a position like mine accomplishes anything of substance alone.

### **Comedy or tragedy?**

I am being honored, in part, because of SLU's success in dealing with the pandemic. In other words, I stand here because of a microorganism that enters the human body through the essential act of breathing, invades cells in the respiratory tract, and begins to replicate at astounding levels, often greatly sickening, if not killing, the host.

The enormous toll this coronavirus has taken is hard to grasp. In less than two years, **5 million, two hundred thousand human beings have died from this virus.** Here in the United States alone, nearly 800 thousand lives have been wiped away thus far.

Each one of us knows someone who has perished. A parent. A grandparent. A sibling. A parishioner. A neighbor. A colleague. A Friend. Gone. Just like that. Adding to the cruelty, some drew their last breath without their loved ones permitted at their bedside. Imagine that pain alone.

On top of this staggering loss are the millions who suffer from long-COVID and other health issues that were created, or intensified, because so many were forced to delay physical examinations and medical treatments.

COVID-19 also wreaked havoc on America's colleges and universities. According to the Chronicle of Higher Education, the pandemic eliminated more than 600 thousand jobs on our nation's campuses. Inside Higher Education reported that women accounted for nearly 60 percent of those lost positions. And more than half of those job losses were experienced by people of color. But I am proud to say that did not occur at Saint Louis University. It did not happen here because of how the people of SLU responded.

Covid-19 is the third epidemic in SLU's storied history. Cholera and the Spanish Flu were very serious, of course, but they occurred in a different

time. We had not faced a crisis like this in a century. Our response was as impressive as any university in the nation.

**SLU's COVID journey began in January of 2020.**

It was then that the university's senior administrators began to monitor news of a coronavirus that had emerged in China. Teams were formed to begin considering what the impact might be on us and how we should respond. In February we had a brief conversation with our trustees about our concerns. Our primary focus, however, was on the bullish enrollment and economic projections we shared as part of an optimistic three-year budget forecast. And then came March. In an instant our world was turned upside down.

In March of 2020 several teams quickly came together to determine how to safely manage our evacuation from campus. At the time, there were over 4,000 residential students at home on spring break. We had to bring all of them back to move out. That had to be done in a way that did not spread the deadly, novel virus to one another. And to the 200-plus students who would remain on campus.

**We succeeded because each of you pivoted and began to work differently.**

Some of you took on roles and duties never before imagined. All of you ensured that the work of the institution continued in a manner that put us squarely among the most successful universities in managing this extraordinary health crisis. Thank you, particularly to our front-line workers

and clinicians, and other essential workers, including our DPS officers, our grounds and maintenance staff, and our custodians.

During that spring of desolation our approach to education was affirmed. Beyond the cost in human health and economic activity, we began to see the social and psychological costs of COVID isolation. These costs too are real and consequential. And to those at a Catholic University, no surprise.

Catholicism realizes that we are social beings. We are meant to be in community with each other — communities that promote human flourishing — communities that are caring and supportive, communities that are based on *cura personalis*, as the Jesuits like to say.

Not long after our students returned home that March we began hearing stories of the struggles they encountered as they tried to move forward with their studies against the disruption the pandemic brought to their families. In addition, separation from all of the support and connections they had on campus was impacting their well-being. This included separation from the sacred rituals and other means of deepening and expressing their faith. You who are part of the Campion Centre know how much the gatherings and rituals of this space mean to our students and how much these faith-filled interactions were missed when we were apart.

**Being together in a supportive and affirming community makes all the difference, particularly at a place like SLU.**

We had long made this case to prospective students and the evidence was now clear. Our individual experiences of the distinctive SLU community of daily interactions and rituals had to be restored as quickly and as closely as possible. We realized that we must do all that was necessary to reconvene in the fall of 2020, a time when many other universities decided that it was too risky to do so.

Granted, we enrolled a smaller entering class that fall, and, to help limit the spread of infection, we intentionally reduced density in our residence halls. These facts and others resulted in less revenue on top of the many mitigation costs we incurred, but we collectively found our way to reduce expenses without cutting people. That was a mission-based decision over which we had multiple conversations at the University Leadership Council and with our trustees.

We knew upon whom the burden of personnel cuts would disproportionately fall — our lower paid staff — and the consequences for them and their families. We were not willing to do that to our people. Instead, we tightened our belts and shared our sacrifices. We froze salaries for most and cut salaries for the highest paid. We suspended our retirement match. We kept our faculty, staff, and administrators fully employed, except for a brief layoff of a group of clinical staff at the height of the pandemic when patient visits were halted. We brought them back to work less than three months later, before the extra state unemployment benefits expired. Through it all, our academic and administrative staff remained fully employed thanks to our shared efforts and sacrifices.

In August 2020, with Covid-19 cases on the rise and no vaccine in sight, we orchestrated a carefully planned return to primarily in-person classes — something less than 30 percent of academic institutions pursued.

We recognized that if we did it right — abiding by our values, following consensus science, seeking the advice of students, faculty, and staff, and carefully planning and executing those plans — we could bring our community back to campus safely. And we did so.

We took that same successful approach from Fall 2020 to prepare for Fall 2021. And despite the face masks that shield the smiles we all long to see, we are back in person again. Nearly all of us now fully vaccinated. Offices once again providing in-person guidance and mentoring to our students. And each of us relishing direct interaction with beloved colleagues.

What lessons have we learned?

**First and foremost, rely on your playbook.**

In times of crisis, any organization should ask four primary questions: 1) What is our mission? 2) What are our values? 3) What are our strategic objectives? 4) What does our community expect of us in this extraordinary situation?

The answers must serve as the primary guides to charting a path forward. This is particularly important for a values-forward, faith-based university like SLU. In fact, it is a distinct advantage of such universities.

I recently spoke with a former SLU administrator, now working for one of the most preeminent private universities in the country. The administrator talked at length about how that university's lack of clarity on their values leaves them rudderless when facing major decisions.

**Second, begin planning early and with a diversity of voices.**

Gather and listen to those you can count on to share an honest perspective, especially in times like this, when health and safety may be at risk. In March 2020, we expanded membership of the University Leadership Council and increased meeting frequency, with some sub-groups meeting daily.

We created working groups to help us respond to the many facets of the crisis. Some advised us on what we should do. For example, one identified what critical public health measures must be in place if we were to return to campus in August 2020. Another working group figured out how to operationalize the public health measures on our campus.

Advisory working group members have represented the diversity of our campus community in the identities they have and the positions they hold. The pandemic was an opportunity for all of us to get more comfortable with having individuals from all levels of our organization in decision-making rooms. Each person at the table, including students, is equally valued. Everyone's contributions are essential. This is a Jesuit approach to how we should view, value, and work with others.

**Third, turn to the experts and allow them to lead**

At SLU we are fortunate to have experts in many health areas germane to our current situation. They enthusiastically stepped up to help guide our path forward. We consulted with a broad group of these experts, and we drew heavily upon a small group that became our core team of authorities. It was important to empower them by frequently vocalizing support and providing a platform for them to speak to stakeholders who were anxious and had scores of questions. As leaders, we must allow those who rise to the occasion to lead, regardless of their title. This too is a Jesuit approach to how we should view and value others.

**Fourth, provide as many options as operations can support.**

In the spring of 2020, universities had minimal opportunity to offer stakeholder's choices as the decision to move to online learning for the remainder of the term cascaded across the country. This phase in the pandemic required continuous communication and rapid response triage to address the peril facing higher education.

As fall 2020 approached, pandemic conditions presented a different dynamic as universities grappled with uncertainties facing them. Schools were striving to have the best chance of maintaining campus health and ensuring student success. At SLU, our students, staff, and faculty shared the complex emotions many were feeling. Their spirits were growing weary, as they longed deeply for the connection that had been absent for months. At the same time, they feared for their health and the health of their peers, their families, and their communities.



Again, we followed our values. We led with empathy, trust, and autonomy, and we gave our faculty, staff and students agency. They had options from which to choose. While giving options meant more work, we felt that trying to force a one-size-fits-all approach was a disservice to the feedback our community offered. Therefore, we decided that faculty could teach fully online if they had healthcare concerns or unmet family care needs. We allowed as many staff as possible to work from home. Students who were uncomfortable with face-to-face instruction could convert their schedule to be online. In the end, more than 70% of our classes were fully or primarily in-person.

St. Ignatius believed that the Jesuits should meet people where they are and that is how we tried to proceed.

**Fifth, communication with transparency builds trust.**

Between March 10, 2020 — when I announced the suspension of in-person classes — and the start of the fall semester, my office sent out over 50 email messages on COVID-related impacts to our community. We hosted University-wide and college/school-specific town halls. Everyone at SLU was worried about COVID-19 and the disruption it was bringing to their lives. They wanted to know what the president and the leadership team were doing about it. So, we told them – continuously.

In any crisis, people want truth and transparency. They want to know they are getting the whole story. If they are not, trust is broken. If, however, you have and maintain trust, it is much easier to achieve alignment and move forward effectively. From the beginning, we committed to sharing as much

detail as possible, as soon as possible, with everyone with whom we were engaged, including parents and families.

Without trust there is no true community.

**Sixth, listen to your community and understand what you must do, even if it is not necessary.**

I decided that we would not open our residence halls and apartments in August of 2020, unless we could do so safely. We knew it would be devastating to have to send the students back home again because we had allowed COVID-19-positive students to move in and promptly create a super-spreading outbreak. Members of our SLU community were anxious and some predicted a dire outcome. Among many other questions from our faculty, I was asked how many would have to die before I would closed the campus again.

Our experts were absolutely convinced that we could open safely. We knew, however, that we had to reduce anxiety and instill confidence in our decision. The experts predicted that if we tested every student living on-campus upon move-in, we would see, at most, a 1-2% positivity rate. But COVID-19 rapid tests were in short supply in early August 2020. We scrambled to source the tests and were ultimately successful. Our experts were unerring; we had an initial positivity rate of 0.63%.

Although it was yet another chore for a tired and overworked staff, transparency in gathering and sharing weekly positivity rates became a priority. That transparency was worth the effort because it was a critical

factor in building the confidence essential for our successful return to campus.

After that first round of COVID test results, we were further convinced that we only needed to do symptomatic testing coupled, perhaps, with targeted cluster testing. Our stakeholders, however, were not going to be convinced that we were operating safely without ongoing asymptomatic testing. Sometimes, the realities of the human-psyche supersede what is scientifically necessary.

So, in addition to targeted clusters of students, we randomly tested one-tenth of the residential students each week. The results were astoundingly good. The numbers fluxuated but always remained low, considerably lower than the city and state.

### **Seventh, in the end, students make the difference**

“To accompany young people in the creation of a hope-filled future” is one of the four universal apostolic preferences of the Society of Jesus. During the 2020-2021 academic year, in message after message, we told our students we believed in them. We reminded them that as students at a Jesuit university, being for and with others is at the heart of our mission and values. They took it from there and joined the others on campus in making the sacrifices necessary to live and learn in community.

The commitment of our students to living our mission made success possible. They wanted to be on campus. They knew that meant sacrifices, and they embraced them. They did the right things even though it is not

easy to follow the mask, social distancing, and small group gatherings only, safeguards when college is a place for building relationships, interacting with new people, attending large events, and socializing, often in sizeable groups in confined spaces.

Our students modeled being men and women for and with others. SGA leaders served on numerous committees engaged in COVID management. Some students, like our RAs, became residence hall ambassadors for keeping the campus safe. Among the many other roles students played, they volunteered to be Public Health Ambassadors auditing spaces and noting where we lacked disinfectant or signage, or other adjustments necessary for a more COVID safe space. Students delivered meals across campus to their peers in isolation and quarantine housing — whether it was 100 degrees or 10 degrees outside.

We relied on more than 120 nursing students to administer COVID tests and vaccines to university community members and our St. Louis neighbors. We have had more than 30 public health graduate students serve as contact tracers. These are COVID detectives tracking down anyone to whom our COVID-positive cases may have spread the infection. Absent the engagement of all of these dedicated students, our COVID-prevention success would have been hamstrung. They were that important to our efforts.

Regardless of how thorough of a plan you create, or how much you communicate, certain elements are unpredictable. We could not have known how the care and generosity in our students' hearts would manifest

in real-time. But the decisions we made based on our values led us to a point where these silver linings shined through.

**I conclude with a sentiment I shared at College Church following the painful suicides with which we grappled early in the term.**

It is essential that we continue to practice what the Catholic Church and the Society of Jesus call us to be. We must be a community of support, a community of care, and a community of concern for each other, regardless of our role at SLU — from senior administrator through the newest student or employee to join.

We must live our Gospel values: support the dignity of all, respect all, accept all, have empathy, demonstrate genuine concern for each other, reach out to each other, practice patience, promote hope, celebrate the glorious differences among us, forgive, share whatever joy you can muster, and genuinely love each other.

Together, we will continue to dialogue, identify what our community most needs, provide solutions, and take appropriate action.

I have repeatedly watched us come through difficult times. Over the course of my Presidency we have had more challenging moments than I care to remember. In each case what carried us through was locking arms and moving forward together as OneSLU.

Higher Purpose. Greater Good.