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Our challenges, our opportunities and our responses
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Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, let me welcome you to these graduation exercises of the St. Augustine Campus of the University of the West Indies. Such a splendid turn out is a comforting indication of your interest in the institution and your wish to participate in the joyous occasion which marks a momentous achievement by your loved ones. We rejoice with you! They are our newest alumni and I believe that their graduation ties them irrevocably to this University as there will never be another place from which they can derive their academic start and their initial preparation for the world of work or the world of further study. I trust that this continued concern for the University and its wellbeing will be life long, so I wish to engage them and you in some reflection on some of the challenges that are of major concern to all of us and the reaction they have engendered here.

It is obvious that our University does not exist in a bubble or a cocoon and the world's problems have major implications for our capacity to execute our basic functions of teaching, research and service to the communities in which we are situated. There may be differences at the margin, but I believe that there would be general agreement that the urgent mega problems of today are the global financial crisis, our environment and the threats posed to it by human action or inaction and human security. They are all interrelated, but it is the financial crisis which is affecting more acutely the capacity of universities worldwide to contribute as effectively as it should to the debate on the other problems.

Universities are famously resilient and there would be general acceptance of the thesis that even as the financial crisis affects everything we do now, we must not lose sight of the fact that the 21st century will belong to those who traffic in information through the process of education. It will be the knowledge from education that will ensure our future wealth and security.

There are vigorous arguments in various fora on the role of the university in the current crisis and some see it as an opportunity to reshape some of the ideology behind the kind of higher education which many had seen as becoming less and less of a public good. Universities were becoming institutions joined at the hip to business and serving

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the profit interests of the market. There is the proposition that since the knowledge that comes for higher education is an essential public good then expenditure in higher education should be spared the cuts that take place in other sectors. But I have found that the predominant attitude in higher education circles is that the universities should lead by example and demonstrate and impress on their students and staff the need for a sense of public responsibility. We find major universities coming to the conclusion that the response has to be a mixture of increases in tuition and fees, more aggressive search for grants and contracts and stimulating growth of their endowment funds. Their alumni are critical partners in these efforts.

Our Caribbean countries are not immune to the crisis and indeed the fragility of our economies and our high transactional costs make us perhaps more vulnerable and obviously the economic situation has had its impact on the University. But I am impressed by the manner in which the University as a whole has confronted the realities of the situation, acknowledging that governments are severely constrained. The constancy of support by our member governments in the past is something for which we are grateful and indeed, very proud.

The response to the crisis has been cast in the context of the current Strategic Plan as there is a firm resolve to continue the effort to translate the strategic vision of the Plan into reality. There are insufficient funds to increase the capacity to meet the demand, which means that there has to be pruning in some places. The Principal has noted that there are many courses that are undersubscribed and therefore to be examined as to whether they can be retained. Attention has been focused on enhancing program quality and delivery, organizational transformation across the campus, making the campus more student-centered by such things as improving residence life, providing better services for students with disabilities and improving the campus health services. A resource conscious culture is necessary. Wages account for 73 % of the budget and there is need to ensure that all staff is accountable. Nevertheless, over the past year the campus has recruited 45 new staff members, and over 700 staff members have benefited from a variety of training courses. There continues to be search for international partnerships and securing new grants and contracts.

But one of the areas which pleases me most is the growth in the graduate programs. Undergraduate enrolment increases more slowly than it did in past year, but I am sure the new graduates will be pleased to note that at 3,275, theirs is the largest graduating class for several years and it is gratifying to note that 678 of you have been awarded higher degrees. Current student numbers are about 17,000 and some 4000 of these are in graduate programs. This emphasis on higher degrees and graduate work is even more significant in the current climate, as it is through graduate work and research in all disciplines that we can contribute to generating the new knowledge that our Caribbean societies need for their development.

You will notice some of the new building that has been completed-the auditorium and classroom building and the significant expansion of Chemical engineering. I must

record our gratitude to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago for providing seven million dollars for vital research projects.

I mentioned that the economic crisis is a global phenomenon and I was impressed by the sage comments of the President of Cornell University on how universities should react to the challenge and what are the opportunities they should grasp. He asked: “What specifically can and should we do to regain our credibility and help solve the difficult and complex problems now facing our country” and I will give an abbreviated version of his recipe.

First, at a time of fiscal dislocation, there is nothing more compelling than leading by example. We all must work to aggressively and systematically reduce costs to gain savings, even if relatively marginal, and use those savings to slow the rate of tuition increases. For our students and their families, every dollar counts.

Second, the enormous potential of higher education to examine problems dispassionately and thoroughly must be deployed to inform the policy debate on the thorniest issues. We can support the rise in student volunteerism in our local communities and nationally.

Third, we must become better citizens locally and regionally and a force for economic development in our states. We need to help our states think about better ways to fulfill their obligations to their people even as public resources diminish. Robust collaborations between higher education and the business community in every locale must be potent forces for economic development. Many of our institutions are already successfully pursuing such activities, but national models and best practices must be developed. The times require that we redouble our efforts.

Fourth, American higher-education institutions also have the duty to think internationally and set up the programs that ensure a sufficient work force for the new global economy and a ready flow of research leading to innovation. Our main industries of growth know no national boundaries. With the information and idea sharing that the Internet makes possible, we in higher education, too, must disregard those boundaries.

Fifth, in difficult economic times, colleges may be tempted to balance budgets on the backs of people. But we need to lead with humanity and attention to all employees in not only good times but also challenging ones. Faculty members are the heart of our institutions. We must be employers that lead the way to show that American organizations should protect our human resources even, or especially, in a time of financial duress.

Finally, we need to explain ourselves more clearly and plainly to the American people, who struggle to pay our tuition. That explanation must clearly indicate the overarching importance of a liberal education and the place of the arts, humanities, and social sciences in developing educated citizens. It's time to reconnect.

I call on my fellow leaders in higher education to come together to make higher education more relevant on the national and international agenda. We must begin to act

not as just another special interest but as an asset: a steppingstone to send forth generations into a world where the ability to apply knowledge makes all the difference.

If there was ever a time for higher education to be front and center in solving societal problems - including those related to economic diversification and development - that time is now.

Many of these sentiments could have been written by Our Vice-Chancellor and the leadership of our University.

Is there a role for our new alumni in helping the University through these difficult times? I believe there is. I am not naïve enough to believe that just after graduation you will increase the University's endowment, but the contribution I ask of you is not a financial one, although as you grow older and become wealthy I hope that will change. I ask you to be champions of the University. I ask you to wear its symbols with pride and be ready to speak up for it in the circles in which the comparative merits of institutions are discussed. I do not ask you to be arrogant and exhibit hubris, but I ask those of you who have had a positive experience here, and I trust you are in the majority, to show your Pelican Pride and become an active member of your alumni association. Register in alumni on line and insist on being informed about what goes on here. In these difficult times these are gifts that are as precious as gold or silver.

Let me end by saluting the parents and loved ones of the graduating class. I can appreciate the sacrifice you have made, and I hope you are satisfied with the product so far. But I ask that you too accept that you have a stake in this place and will join those of us who wish to see it grow and prosper.

I thank you.