When I told a friend that this would be the topic of this Observer column, she responded, “If you pick that topic, people will immediately turn the page!”

I hope you’re still with me. If so, let me use the next five minutes to tell you why I think it is so important for the University to focus on how we plan for the next five years.

The University of Hartford—and colleges and universities all over the country—face very significant threats to our continued vibrancy, perhaps even our continued existence, unless we recognize them and adapt to them. Among those threats are the declining numbers of traditional-age, college-bound youth in the Northeast and their increasing reliance on financial aid; changing American attitudes toward the value and cost of higher education; and the explosion in online learning and other emerging technologies.

1. Our University, as well as many others, was built on a federation model: that is, a university is essentially a federation of schools and colleges whose principle focus is their own educational model and culture. That’s essentially a part of our founding story here, but it is also true at almost every university I know. Whatever the value of such a structure, it does not allow for the nimbleness and the resources to adapt to the rapid and massive change that characterizes our age.

2. Our University has been characterized since its founding by close relationships between students and faculty and staff, and among students. These relationships are what the majority of alumni treasure most about their experiences here. This isn’t just my opinion. It is the most dominant result of market research conducted by Simpson Scarborough, a nationally known leader in this field that the University has retained to help us plan for the future. The important things to realize for this discussion are (a) this system has developed around people coming together in one geographic space to learn, and (b) it is relatively expensive to operate.

I know these are very general descriptions, threats, and goals, but many of us have been busy over the summer adapting them to the specific situations the University of Hartford faces. We’ll continue this activity—engaging as many faculty, staff, alumni, and students as we can—throughout the fall and winter, hoping to develop a comprehensive plan by the spring.

What will that plan consist of? It is far too soon to tell yet. But I will tell you what I, for one, think are the essential questions we should be asking ourselves:

- How do we take the values, both moral and educational, that have traditionally characterized the University of Hartford and use them to help form a University that is more flexible and nimble in responding to a world defined by the increasing pace of change?
- In other words, how do we ensure our sustainability?
- And in doing so, how do we reach new groups of students who can benefit from educational technology that can now bring them a University of Hartford education anywhere in the world?

During this process, I know there will be people who feel we have mischaracterized our strengths or the challenges or what we should do. I hope all of us can have a lively and thoughtful conversation on these subjects this fall and winter.

What is important now is for us to use the next five months or so to construct a plan that will help our University face the challenges of the next five years, the five years beyond that, and the century ahead.

Thanks for reading this far. Please let me know by email (horky@hartford.edu) if you have thoughts or comments. I would especially love to know your thoughts on what makes us distinctive. We are all in this together, and I value your thoughts, now and in the months and years ahead.

If you want to read more, see the strategic planning website: hartford.edu/aboutuofh/office_pres/committees/strategic-plan/default.aspx.

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