H ow’s this for a startling fact? I have just completed my fourth year as president of the University of Hartford. If I were an undergraduate student (and if I had made satisfactory academic progress), I would have graduated in May! I came to the University four years ago with the Class of 2002, and, as I said at Commencement, I will always consider myself a member of that special class.

Like most university seniors, this fourth year has forced me to review my career here and plan for the future.

Just as undergraduates begin many new things during their university careers, we have started and completed many new initiatives during the past four years. We have a new magnet school, a new system of roads and parking lots, a new entrance to campus, a strategic compensation plan that is making our faculty and staff salaries more and more competitive, and new programs to involve the University’s faculty, staff, and students with the Greater Hartford community.

Among all this progress, our most important new initiative is a strategic planning process that is helping us focus on improving our strengths as a university. I want to talk about one of the topics we have been discussing in that process—an initiative that I believe is vitally important to the future of the University—strengthening our programs in science, engineering, and technology.

Now, many of you are graduates of one of those programs or parents of students who are currently enrolled in them. And you may well be thinking: aren’t these programs already strong?

Our programs in science, engineering, and technology do have many strengths, and they have traditionally produced many of our most successful graduates. But I believe we have just begun to recognize our potential for excellence in these areas, and with careful planning and appropriate investments, we can really develop nationally known programs in these disciplines.

To do so will require two major long-term initiatives, both related. First, we must develop greater synergies between our programs in these fields. They are currently spread across at least seven different colleges: basic sciences, mathematics, and computer science in the College of Arts and Sciences, Hartford College for Women, and Hillyer College; engineering in the College of Engineering; technology and architecture in Ward College; health professions and nursing in the College of Education, Nursing and Health Professions; and management information systems in the Barney School of Business.

It is clear to me that whatever our collegiate structure, we must bring these programs together in functional ways that will help them build on combined faculty resources and critical mass. Consider, for example, that educational work in information technology is currently pursued in five different majors in four different schools: computer science in Arts and Sciences; computer engineering in Engineering; computer engineering and management information systems in Barney; and Interactive Information Technology, one of our newest majors, which is interdisciplinary in nature and is housed outside the collegiate structure.

All of this cries out for greater cooperation and collaboration. It also cries out for new facilities that will bring these programs physically closer together. And that is the second related initiative we are undertaking: the creation of an integrated science, engineering, and technology (ISET) complex. This project, which will renovate Dana Hall and parts of United Technologies Hall as well as create new space adjacent to Dana Hall, is now in the early planning stages. I outlined my specific dreams for ISET in the 2001-2002 President’s Report, so I won’t repeat them here.

Suffice it to say that I believe this new complex is vitally important to our future. It will take years to raise the money and complete the construction. It will take hard work and a lot of faculty consultation and discussion. But I believe we have a real opportunity to create an institutional strength in science, engineering, and technology that will rival our national reputation in the arts. I am committed to pursuing this with the energy it takes to make it successful. I think in a very real sense our future depends on it.

You might well wonder why an English professor-turned-president would focus on science, engineering, and technology as areas of strategic focus. Isn’t it true that many other areas also could be strengthened?

My interest in science, engineering, and technology is based on three important factors. We have strong faculty in all three areas, and some of our programs (acoustical engineering as an example) already have national reputations. We already draw many of our brightest and most talented students in these areas. And my friends in the corporate and industrial world tell me that people educated in science, engineering, and technology are the most in demand. In short, we have the talent in our faculty and students, and the demand is there.

No one would be more surprised by my dedication to building the sciences than my mother, if she were still alive. A biology major in college, my mother was always slightly disappointed, I suspect, that neither my sister nor I followed in her footsteps. But like many seniors, as I complete my fourth year at the University, I find myself wishing I had listened to my parents more.

I am joking about this, of course, but I am completely serious about the importance I place in building science, engineering, and technology here. I believe strongly that the University has a real opportunity to emerge as a leader in these areas, and I intend to pursue that opportunity vigorously in the years ahead. You’ll be hearing more from me about that in the future.

As an honorary member of the Class of 2002, that is one graduation promise I intend to keep.

Walter Harrison