Address by President Walter Harrison, August 27, 2003

The fall kickoff event is always one of the highpoints of the academic year for me—not only because it marks the beginning of the year, but also because it reminds me so vividly every year of what a wonderful community this is. Five years ago almost to the day I stood before you all for the first time, and I still count the reception you gave me then among my very warmest moments as president.

Today we have a group of people—both faculty and staff—who are joining us for the first time, and they too will learn shortly what a great and caring community this is. So, may I ask all of you who have joined the University since February who are with us today—both faculty and staff—to stand so that we may give you a warm round of applause as a way of welcoming you to our community.

I wish time would allow me to introduce each of you personally, but I would like to ask three people who are joining our leadership team and with whom many of you will have reason to work to please stand:

Joe Voelker, the new dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, coming to us from Franklin and Marshall College

Otto Wahl, the new director of the Graduate Institute of Professional Psychology, coming to us from George Mason University

Joe Comeau, the new director of the student centers, coming to us from Bentley College

This marks the beginning of my sixth year here, and in each of the past five years I have used these remarks to look back on the past year and look forward to the year to come. I intend to do that again today.

Although Beverly Maksin, our vice president for finance and administration, always wants me to say that results are not final until we receive the report of our auditors, I am very happy to say that we anticipate closing the books on another very successful year financially. For the sixth year in a row we will have completed the year in the black, and for the fourth consecutive year we have been able to finish with a positive balance of over $1 million dollars. As we have in years past, we will add this balance to our operating reserve, which means that we now have a “rainy day” fund of $4 million.

On August 1 the Chronicle of Higher Education published an article about the University’s financial turnaround. I hope you have all seen that by now—if you haven’t, Karen Van Cott, my secretary, just happens to have a few with her. Ask her for one.

In that article, the Chronicle pointed out that in the past five years we have completely erased a $2.9 million accumulated deficit AND compiled a $4 million operating reserve. That’s a $6.9 million swing in five years—a spectacular achievement, and as I have in years past I want to salute Beverly and her staff in finance—especially Tom Perra and Arosha Jayawickrema—for spearheading this effort. Bravo!

The Chronicle also points out that this turnaround has been the result of spectacular success in our admissions area, and once again Chuck Colarulli, Rick Zeiser, Suzanne
Peters, and their staff in admissions and financial aid have produced another outstanding first year class—which may be bigger than last year’s class, and last year’s class was the largest in our history. This year’s class will also be our best class ever academically, but more about that success in just a minute. Our full-time undergraduate student body is now larger than it has ever been—we had 4,400 full-time undergraduates last year and will likely be even a little bit larger than that this year. I am well aware that this large student body is not only a blessing; it also puts significant pressure on all of us who have to serve them, especially our staff in residential life and facilities. I want to thank all of them—and all the rest of you in every area of the university that directly serves students—public safety, the library staff, SASC, mail services, the registrar’s and bursar’s offices, the Copy Shoppe—for everything you do to serve these students. Many thanks.

We will also close the books on the last fiscal year with a very successful year of fundraising. We raised $13 million in gifts and pledges last year toward the Campaign of Commitment. The Campaign total has now reached $85 million, which is great news. But it also signifies a real challenge if we are to meet our $175 million goal in four years. We have built great momentum for the Campaign as enthusiasm for the University and the wonderful success we have achieved in recent years grows, but we have a real push to make in the coming four years. So if you don’t see as much of me as you might like in the coming year, that is because I am on the road raising money.

While I’m on fundraising, I also want to point out that we added more than 1,000 net new donors, and we increased the percentage of our alumni who give by almost 60%. I especially want to thank Jennifer Williams and Andy Bernstein in the office of external relations for the great success of the annual fund. Most importantly, though, I want to thank you. In the last academic year the percentage of faculty and staff who gave to the annual fund was 40%. That shows that you believe in the University, and on behalf of all of us, thank you.

Before I leave the financial world, I am also very pleased to say that we anticipate another very successful financial year in the year to come. This past year we enacted the fourth year of our faculty-staff strategic compensation plan, and I intend to ask the Board of Regents to implement the fifth year when we plan for next year’s budget. Over the past four years we have been able to move staff salaries to a place where, generally, we are very competitive in the marketplace, although there are always areas where we can improve. We have similarly improved faculty salaries, but there is much yet to be accomplished if we are to make up ground on our competition. I should point out that we were able to increase faculty and staff salaries, both through the merit pool and through targeted strategic increases, in a year when many colleges and universities (and local industries) had no salary increases at all.

In my opinion, however, the recent history of the University is about far more than a financial turnaround, as amazing as that turnaround may be. To use a word of which Donna Randall is extremely fond, I believe we are all collectively involved in TRANSFORMING this University.

Let me begin to outline this transformation by looking at how we have improved our student body over the past five years. First and foremost, we have improved their academic quality significantly. We have been able to improve the SAT scores at the bottom range of the class by an astonishing 75 points. By and large, we are now admitting students who are capable of doing the academic work here. At the same time
we have broadened the markets from which we take students, and in several high schools
the University is now seen as a “hot school.” In addition, and very importantly, students
of color now make up 17% of our undergraduate student body.

Last week U.S. News and World Report’s annual rankings of colleges tracked our rapid
ascent among national doctoral universities, improving our ranking over last year in the
third tier of the very best universities in the country. And here is what, to my mind, a
most important statistic: our acceptance rate has improved from 82% in 1998 to 63% this
fall. In other words, five years ago we ranked with Fairleigh Dickinson University in
selectivity. This fall we rank with Michigan State University or the University of
Connecticut. We are on the move!

Now, as David Goldenberg pointed out to me recently, it is not enough to just attract
these students. We want them to stay here. And David has shown me research that
shows that the most important time for affecting students’ attitudes toward a university is
during their first three weeks on campus. So that is where all you come in. If you see the
opportunity to reach out to a new student, especially during the first three or four weeks,
please do. Just knowing that someone cares can make all the difference.

Nowhere is the transformation of the University of Hartford more apparent than in the
improvements and renovations on our campus. This has been another extremely busy
summer of construction work, and I am grateful to Norm Young, John Michalewicz, and
their staff in facilities for their great work in this area. I can’t cover everything we’ve
done—we have, after all, spent between $3.5 and $4 million in facilities improvements
this summer”so I’m just going to note some high points:

We have completed construction of Abrahms Hall, renovating the former power plant
and creating a brand new classroom and office building. If you haven’t seen it already,
please go over and take a look. It is one great small building, containing a state-of-the-art
Interactive Information Technology lab, a classroom, four faculty offices, and an office
suite for the Office of Grants and Contracts. We will work on the landscaping around the
building this fall, the first project of our new landscaping master plan, but the building
itself is now finished—and it is one sweet little building!

We have completed phase two of our project to renovate the Village Apartments, this
summer renovating the bathrooms and kitchens in quads 6 and 7, repairing and replacing
roofing, improving the drainage in quads 1 through 4, replacing carpeting in many
apartments, and replacing the entire sidewalk that loops the Village.

We have constructed a new classroom and a new office for the Faculty Center for
Learning and Development in the Mortensen Library. This, too, is wonderful academic
space, and really helps us keep pace with our peers. We have also created new classroom
space and new space for Information Technology Services on the first floor of the
Computer Center.

We have transformed the gallery in Taub Hall at the Hartford Art School into the Linda
and Donald Silpe Gallery, which now gives us a second great exhibition space to go with
Joseloff Gallery and really improves the entrance to the School.

We have completely renovated the cafeteria space in University Commons. This means
that in the past two years we have renovated both major student dining halls on this campus. That is really significant and, again, helps us keep pace with our peers.

We have added new signage around campus, which should make the campus both more attractive and more accessible to visitors on campus. We have also named the streets and added street signs. We still need to install signs at each parking lot, which will make it easier to identify individual buildings, but that is the next phase of the project.

And, as you know if you tried to walk over here from several spots on campus, we are restoring the planking on the pedestrian bridge over the Hog River. We have cut this a little close, but I am assured we will finish by this weekend.

Finally, and I expect a flourish of trumpets for this one, we have repaired important sections of our roads and the old speed mountains have disappeared. Yes, it is true that they have been replaced by civilized little plastic speed bumps to slow down (shall we say) our more aggressive students, but they are smaller and should make all of our lives more livable.

Many of us are now hard at work planning the next major project for our campus—indeed the largest project (in terms of dollars) in our history: the Integrated Science Engineering and Technology Complex. Known as ISET, this project will add science space and completely renovate Dana Hall, which will allow us to bring (for the first time in our history) all of our science, engineering, and technology disciplines together. A building committee”comprised of regents, administrators, and faculty and chaired by regent (and alumna) Victoria Cerami”is hard at work. Our architects, William Wilson and Associated Architects, and our construction manager, Shawmut Design and Construction, are already working with the committee in planning the building. Our plans are to break ground in the early spring, and the project will take over three years to complete. So the construction work has just begun, but boy will it transform our campus.

So I am out of time and I haven’t even touched upon the new University High School of Science and Engineering, the continued spectacular success of the University of Hartford world-class Magnet School, the strategic planning being done at Hartford College for Women, or the great work being done to bring together the new College of Engineering and Technology. That’s right—we now have eight schools and colleges plus one magnet school.

We have done a lot together in five years, but much remains to be done. Imagine a University with great science, engineering, and technology facilities, with a great new performing arts center, with new athletic fields, and with new art facilities. Imagine a University with enough financial aid resources to satisfy the needs of all of our students. Imagine a University which really touches the heart of the community in which it lives. We have great faculty, we have great staff, we have the potential to do all of these things. And we’re on our way to doing them all.