November 5, 2026

Dear Sewanee Community,

Since my last installment of ***Messages from Walsh-Ellett***, the campus has hosted a number of significant events, including Family Weekend and meetings of the Board of Trustees and Board of Regents. Homecoming celebrations will begin this weekend. I want to express my deep thanks to all of those across campus who make such events possible and successful.

Sustainability Initiatives

If you saw equipment being used in the grass near the Bishop's Common on Halloween, it was not an apparition, just a small rig digging a test well. The test well is part of one of two sustainability projects that were included in the University's Master Plan and are being pursued on campus.

The test well will help the University to determine the viability of a geothermal well project in the area between the Bishop's Common and Stirling's Coffee House. The geothermal project is designed to take advantage of gaps between temperatures in the air and below the earth's surface. During the winter months, water circulates from the cool earth's surface to 400 to 600 feet below the earth, where the water is warmed, as it travels through pipes drilled for the project. The water returns to the surface and is used to warm air in HVAC systems serving the Bishop's Common, St. Luke's Hall, St. Luke's Chapel, and Hoffman Hall. In the summer, the process reverses; hot water is cooled by traveling through the same pipes below the surface of the earth. The University has contracted a civil engineering company to drill a test well, which will help us test the stability of the soil and the efficiency of the circulating water in conducting heat.

The second project involves rooftop solar arrays on Hamilton Hall, the Wellness Commons, and the Fowler Center, buildings that have relatively new roofs and adequate exposure to the sun to be cost effective. The geothermal project and rooftop solar projects will help the University to reduce its carbon footprint and utility costs.

Southeast Connector Pipeline

As I mentioned in **my email on Nov. 3**, Kinder Morgan and Southern Natural Gas Company have proposed a natural gas pipeline with a 48-inch diameter to pass through central Tennessee, including Sewanee, St. Andrew's Sewanee School, and other parts of Franklin and surrounding counties. The executive staff has been deeply engaged in conversation about the options available as it considers how to respond. The executive staff feels a strong sense of responsibility for the well-being of our local community but also the communities and environment around it. The review process for such pipelines at the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) involves submission of plans, public commentary periods, and environmental assessments, which can take more than two years. The University has been advised, however, that early engagement on the proposal is less costly and more likely to influence the outcome than engagement at later stages of the review process. The executive staff will continue with its due diligence on this matter as it works toward a response to the proposal.

Salary and Wage Compression

For the last two years, as part of the University's work to implement its operational plan, I have chaired a working group that has examined salary and wage compression among University employees. The working group, which includes Professor Andrea Hatcher, Dean Jenny Cooley, Dean Jim Turrell, Chief Financial Officer Isabelle Love, Assistant Vice President of Human Resources Brian Evans, Director of People and Culture Jessica Welch, and Director of HR Innovation Chris Champion, has been engaged in analyses of compensation to identify groups and individuals whose pay rates are out of step with comparison groups. In Fiscal Year (FY)26, the University was able to begin to make progress in addressing this issue among faculty. In the first half of 2026, the working group had identified further steps to address salary compression issues among faculty and staff, but a spike in inflation in May and June 2026 led the University administration to increase all employees' pay to offset most of the rise in inflation. Now that FY27 is well underway and the tuition revenue for FY27 is clarifying, CFO Isabelle Love has designated a portion of the University's revenue for addressing salary compression in the current fiscal year. The working group has begun to reconvene, and last week, it took steps to address some areas of salary compression among faculty. Twenty faculty members received notice of increases in their base salaries as a result of the work.

In the coming weeks, the working group will continue its work on staff compensation. The working group will focus on steps to address a number of instances where pay for positions at Sewanee falls short of comparisons to benchmarks for similar positions in higher education. As further decisions are made about adjustments to compensation, the working group will contact the affected individuals and report to the University community.

Bright Star

The performance of "Bright Star" at the Tennessee Williams Center marked a high point in theater during my 32 years at Sewanee. The performance of a musical can serve as a metric for the individual components of a musical and the collaboration among the various elements. In this case, the individual elements—the vocal performances, acting, orchestra, dancing, lighting, and staging—were excellent. Musicals can indicate how deep the bench is for vocal performers, and "Bright Star" demonstrated how numerous and talented our student vocalists have become. This is surely a tribute to our music department and the University Choir who have organized and elevated vocal performers and ensembles across campus and beyond. The performance of our student actors, the dance elements, costuming, and set design were equally strong and demonstrated the overall strength of the theatre department. Finally, the orchestra for "Bright Star" brought together students, faculty members, and community members to deliver an excellent performance.

Beyond the individual performances, the most gratifying element of the performance of "Bright Star" was the collaboration across so many units and individuals from various parts of campus that made the musical such a success. The performance serves as a testimony to the leadership and good spirit that the music and theatre departments brought to the stage.

Sincerely,

Scott Wilson
Provost