CHAPTER TWO

Vision, or What No Administrator Can Do Without

Motivation is central to success in any enterprise. The most powerful motivation is identification with a vision. When we act because we identify with an appealing ideal, our actions are internally driven and voluntary. Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, in his classic essay on university leadership, argues that a president “may be the best administrator in the world, but without a clear and bright and, yes, beautiful vision, he is leading nowhere” (12). The ultimate criterion for evaluating a vision is intellectual; rhetoric and communication presuppose sound arguments. Ideas are thus the first presupposition of effective leadership. A coherent and multifaceted vision interweaves such diverse areas as the purpose of scholarly research, pedagogical values, ethical principles, institutional history, and pragmatic considerations. A compelling vision attracts future students; forms the community of current faculty and students; and inspires graduates, donors, and other supporters.

A compelling vision can also serve as a distinguishing alternative in relation to other institutions. Every vision has a negative, polemical side, even if it must be respectfully and diplomatically articulated. We want to be this and not that. Departing from a widespread tendency to shy away from distinctions of any kind, a university that wants to be different must be guided by distinction as well as by the reasons why this or that alternative has not been chosen. A vision and the arguments for it, as well as the capacity to articulate it, come not only from the president but also from every member of the university who is invited to contribute to the formulation and articulation of vision, albeit at varying levels of intensity and with varying levels of knowledge, experience, and authority.

Literature on leadership regularly places vision at the top of its scale of essential attributes (Bolman and Deal 340; Bennis 39; Fisher and Koch 68). Hesburgh, president of the University of Notre Dame from 1952 to 1987, stated, “The very essence of leadership is you have to have a vision. It’s got to be a vision you articulate clearly and forcefully on every
occasion. You can’t blow an uncertain trumpet.” (Bowen and Dolan 68) In books on higher education, a sentence such as the following is not at all uncommon or untrue: “The hallmark of any individual dean is his or her vision for the college and plan for realizing that vision” (Bright and Richards 20).

Vision is essential to the all-important tasks of setting priorities and allocating resources. It is also a necessary condition of what James MacGregor Burns calls transforming as opposed to simply transactional leadership. Transforming leadership leads to inspirational and meaningful change, thus elevating expectations and aspirations; moreover, it fosters its continuation by energetically ensuring that the vision is embedded in the communal culture and that new leaders are developed, who can carry the vision forward.

The vision and resulting priorities should guide all action. As Yogi Berra once said, “If you don’t know where you’re going, then when you get there, you’ll be lost.” Only after a vision and corresponding goals have been formulated do questions of budget, strategies of motivation, and organizational principles come into play. For that reason it is not surprising that a recent survey of trustees revealed that the most important criterion in evaluating presidents is their promotion of the institution’s mission (Chronicle of Higher Educ., “Trustees” A21). Of course trustees, the evaluators of the president’s efficacy in realizing vision, must themselves be attuned to vision and the institution’s highest priorities. Cole wisely suggests that trustees take, partly through digital technology, an extensive course on the history of higher education; the history of their own university; and their university’s core values, inner workings, and contemporary challenges (Toward 286).

Identity and Identity Crises

What would be an example or two of institutional distinction or identity? When I entered the job market as a graduating PhD, I had to make a weighty decision: I turned down positions at two premier private research universities, as well as one at an excellent liberal arts college, to work at Ohio State. My decision was difficult and complex, but involved, among other factors, a commitment to the project of public higher education and a recognition that I might learn more at this very large, interesting, and different institution. I had a wonderful experience there, but one issue bothered and perplexed me. Because Ohio State had two identities in tension with one another, an internally contradictory vision had developed.

Ohio State was, on the one hand, the state’s flagship research university, attracting the best faculty and overseeing the most and, in almost all cases, the strongest graduate programs. On the other hand, it was a university with very low tuition, a figure regulated by the state, and open admissions. When I arrived, the standard for undergraduate admissions was essentially first come, first served, so long as the prospective student had a minimal level of competence. Over time Ohio State became modestly competitive, but even so, most of the students who applied were admitted; when I left, the graduation rate (below 60 percent) was still modest enough that
faculty had the sense they were investing in many students who would never graduate. The faculty for the most part was not the right faculty for that student body. The vision dictated that it be at one and the same time Ohio’s flagship research university and its open access university. Many of the undergraduates would have been better served at community colleges, which have appropriate support structures for students who are less prepared. When the president wanted to introduce more selective admissions, he ran up against legislators who wanted the B and C students from their districts to be able to attend the premier state university.

There was much to admire about Ohio State. It provided an open avenue for students from all kinds of backgrounds. Almost every department had a large faculty with many strong performers. The emotional attachment to the university was not restricted to students, but encompassed, partly through the university’s extraordinary success in athletics, the entire state. Faculty often worked in heroic ways to overcome the contradictory vision by, for example, developing honors courses for the best students. The very scale of the institution forced its leaders to introduce efficiencies and accountability.

When Notre Dame approached me about a position after I had been at Ohio State for nearly a decade, I was initially uninterested. Notre Dame was smaller, and it had virtually no graduate program in my field, simply a tiny and mediocre master’s program. When I agreed to give a lecture there, I slowly became intrigued. What became evident to me was that Notre Dame had an even more complex, but more coherent, identity than Ohio State. I can recall a few years later explaining to Notre Dame’s provost my sense of the university’s distinction. He was existentially intrigued by the question of Notre Dame’s identity. Notre Dame, I said, was at one and the same time a residential liberal arts college with a traditional emphasis on student learning; a research university that had become increasingly dynamic and ambitious; and a Catholic institution of international standing. When I chose to join the faculty in 1996 and become, a year later, dean of its largest college, several factors were involved, but the most important was my sense that Notre Dame had a fascinating and complex identity and the aspiration to come ever closer to realizing its highest ambitions. In one respect after another, the three parts of Notre Dame’s triadic identity enriched each other.

My inaugural address as dean focused entirely on Notre Dame’s triadic identity and was an attempt to sort out for myself and for the faculty how important these three elements were and how they could be interwoven so as to make the whole greater than the sum of the parts (“Notre Dame’s Triadic Identity”). At the same time, I did not hesitate to note challenges, such as anti-intellectual currents in American Catholicism, inadequate funding of the research enterprise, or insufficiently differential decisions concerning faculty quality. I was open in my criticisms of Notre Dame for failing to realize the lofty aspirations inherent in each of these identities. We could strengthen each one, I argued, and we did over time.

A vision should be clear, and it can and should be repeated again and again. I articulated the concept of Notre Dame’s triadic identity on one occasion after another until it could not be
forgotten or overlooked. What I saw in Notre Dame has since become in many ways the self-
understanding of Notre Dame and its current leadership. As an outsider I was in a good position
to name what was already inherent in the institution but had not yet been fully brought to the
level of the concept.

Whereas some research universities had let slide the importance of undergraduate
learning, Notre Dame had never relinquished its traditional focus on students, which elicited
strong alumni support. The liberal arts ideal remained vibrant in the residential campus, the core
curriculum, and the education of the whole person. Spirituality in general and Catholicism in
particular enriched the liberal arts experience. In a setting both academic and religious, no
questions were bracketed, and ultimate questions were actively encouraged.

While many Catholic universities had, as a result of drift or conscious imitation of the
mainstream, lost their distinctive mission, Notre Dame had not. Notre Dame defined its research
foci in the light of its Catholicism, recognizing the formal advantage of having a distinct niche
and the substantive advantage of underscoring thereby its Catholic mission. Its initial emphasis
had been on philosophy, theology, and medieval studies. Other strengths then emerged around
issues central to a Catholic university such as commitment to civil and human rights and
programs of study on various geographic spheres where Catholicism is a dominant cultural
marker, for example, Latin American studies and Irish studies. We developed expertise in an
array of fields that make sense for a Catholic university: in the humanities, for example, religious
and intellectual history, literature and religion, and sacred music; and in the social sciences,
poverty, education, and development, as well as religion and politics and peace studies.

Where Ohio State had an identity crisis because of two visions or identities in conflict
with each another, Notre Dame’s identity was hampered by gaps between its complex normative
understanding of itself, which was very appealing, and what it had achieved to date. As I pointed
out in my address, gaps existed between aspiration and reality, and recognizing those gaps could
foster improvement.

Beyond an overarching sense of vision, one needs to focus on specific goals, so early on
as dean I articulated six goals, which remained vibrant for more than a decade. First, emphasize
Notre Dame’s triadic identity as a residential liberal arts college with a strong emphasis on
student learning, a dynamic and increasingly ambitious research university, and a Catholic
institution of international standing. Second, improve policies and procedures, to ensure greater
accountability, more due process, and fuller faculty governance; and enhance resources through
wiser and more efficient use of our own resources, increases in annual rate funding, and new
initiatives in development. Third, become the best in the world in signature areas. Fourth,
address the most significant moral issues of the coming century: new quandaries in ethics,
challenges facing developing countries, and the ecological crisis. Fifth, foster those programs
that have exhibited strength and are poised for excellence, including a selection of large and
high-impact departments. Sixth, address previously neglected areas, above all the arts,
At the end of my time as dean, I returned to all eight goals and gave the following accounts: first orally, to the faculty; then to the advisory council, the group of donors with whom I had worked most closely; and later to the board of trustees. Eventually, I composed a more formal account in writing, delineating what we had done well and what was still unsolved (Dean’s Report). These, I believe, are the requisite steps for advancing a vision: (1) articulate an appealing and distinctive vision; (2) identify the gaps between that normative vision and one’s current situation, developing strategies to help bridge that gap; and (3) give an account of progress and continuing challenges along the way.

**Vision and Diversity**

A university can articulate its vision in any number of ways. A Catholic university differs from a secular university, and a liberal arts college from a research university. A university that enrolls the best prospective students has a different mission than one that educates a wide range of academically prepared students. But these are still relatively formal and generic distinctions. One could imagine a university that has as its signature structure not departments but interdisciplinary initiatives; one that focuses on the challenges of developing countries or on the ecological crisis; one that orients the undergraduate years around discussions of great books; one that places a recurring emphasis on community-based research; one that offers bilingual instruction; or one that emphasizes the increasing prominence of Asia. Abundant other possibilities exist, as do combinations of the above.

In contrast to many other countries, where one model of the university predominates, the United States has a tremendous variety of colleges and universities: private and public, large and small, national and regional. The United States has institutions with fewer than five hundred students and others with more than fifty-five thousand; universities with tuition less than $1,500 per year and others that cost more than $60,000 per year. It has institutions where virtually everyone graduates in four years and others where a majority of the students work or online learning is the dominant model and graduation takes much longer and is less likely.

Historically, the country’s vast size has played a role in fostering diversity, as has competition among the colonies and then the states, religious differences, and the boldness of both university founders and early investors. This range of institutions means that every student interested in an education has one avenue or another. No single model can address society’s diverse needs. Countries that have traditionally lacked such variety have suffered.

One consequence of diversity is a tremendous range in quality and type of university, including the emergence of for-profit institutions, which exhibit no faculty or student interest in research and focus entirely on skills acquisition. Positive elements such as convenient locations,
staggered start times for classes, and evening classes have unfortunately been offset by low standards (Angulo); low graduation rates (Chronicle of Higher Educ., Almanac 2011–12, 44); soaring student debt (Almanac 2011–12, 45) and high student default rates (Anderson; Angulo); as well as allegations of various kinds of fraud, often the result of the desire to meet the bottom line or enhance marketing (Angulo; Field). While only 11 percent of students attend for-profit colleges, they account for 44 percent of the student loan defaults (Angulo x). On average, the thirty leading for-profit colleges spend 17 percent of their budgets on instruction and 42 percent on getting students to enroll and paying off investors (139). Strayer Education, whose CEO earned $42 million in 2009, that year spent $1,329 per student on instruction and allocated $6,968 per student to marketing and profits (145).

Another result of American diversity and innovation involves massive open online courses (MOOCs). That such an innovation would emerge on American soil or that in today’s age such courses would quickly become global is not surprising. Some MOOCs are for profit, whereas others are nonprofit enterprises. In many cases the faculty are among the best in the world. Advantages of MOOCs and of the broader integration of online learning include access for persons around the globe, independent of income; the diversity of learners and thus of contributors to discussion groups; the learning advantage of being able to rewind a lecture multiple times; the ability to analyze where students engaged in exercises encounter difficulties; opportunities for learning and enrichment beyond regular credit hours; the capability to pool faculty resources in selected areas across universities; the potential integration of individual lectures into student learning at one’s own and at other universities, including less well-funded institutions, which also leverages class time for discussion and problem solving instead of lectures; and less inhibiting environments that may encourage shy students to contribute to discussions. Although critics tend to view MOOCs as completely incompatible with liberal learning, they can in fact make aspects of liberal learning available to larger segments of society as well as foster peer learning beyond the academy (Roth 11–18). Challenges of MOOCs involve the false perception that such courses could replace engaged seminar learning; the tendency to substitute more nuanced assessment measures with multiple-choice exams; the financial risk and potential loss of focus for the universities; the outsourcing of academic vision and priorities to corporations; the opportunity cost for faculty members as universities embark on such initiatives; the high dropout rates among those who are using online learning not as a diversion but as a primary path to education; and the complexities involved in ensuring and documenting student success.

Identifying a vision has an obvious normative moment. What has such intrinsic value or value for society that we should make it our obligation? A vision should be noble and inspiring; it should stretch the institution, but it must also take into account facticity. What kind of university do we want to become, given who we are now? Realistically, what is our greatest potential? What would we do if money were no object, but also, what steps can we take to define ourselves and improve ourselves in the absence of new resources? Another lens that a university
can adopt to help imagine a vision is to reflect on the weaknesses of the higher education landscape, as I did at the close of chapter 1, and then determine which of those weaknesses it can address and overcome so as to gain distinction and a competitive advantage. Yet another lens, one adopted to some degree by Jacobs University Bremen, is to look at the strengths of another system, in this case the American, and ask which of those strengths can we realize here, in this case in Germany, thereby becoming distinctive.

Jacobs University was founded and chartered in 1999 and enrolled its first class of students in 2001. The university has interwoven three elements to form a distinctive identity. First, Jacobs has sought to become like a private American university. Its campus culture fosters community through residential halls and extracurricular activities, activities, such as a choir, a student newspaper, and sports teams. It stresses administrative flexibility. For the German university landscape, its small size, fewer than fifteen hundred students, is unique. A career center helps students move on to the next level, be it further study, volunteer work, or employment. In addition, the university has ladder professors (assistant, associate, and full), with tenure review; powerful deans; a fund-raising office; an admissions office to select and recruit students; and high tuition combined with need-based and merit-based scholarships. The student–faculty ratio, currently 11–1, is much like that of an excellent American university. Second, the university made a decision to become truly international, drawing students from all continents and employing English as the language of instruction. Its students come from more than a hundred countries, with students from Germany representing 25–30 percent. Diversity and learning from one’s peers are principles of good learning from which Jacobs University benefits. On average, graduates speak three or more languages. Third, the university chose to become distinctively interdisciplinary. Programs exist in integrated social sciences, integrated cultural studies, and integrated environmental studies.

At Jacobs, the incentive structures, diversity, and campus orientation are all countercultural. It is helpful for identity to offer something distinctive. Thus far, the Jacobs University experiment has been successful in terms of student qualifications, graduation rates, and rankings. Its greatest challenge, as acute now as it has been at any time, involves resources.

With respect to students and their parents, mission is an advantage. Faculty members can also be attracted to distinction. In many cases, they will leave higher-ranking departments or universities to help create or advance a distinctive university. I have seen that firsthand in our hiring at Notre Dame. One must be prepared to counter the argument that hiring for mission is too burdensome—that hiring for quality and diversity is difficult enough without adding mission to the mix. Doing so will reduce the number of eligible applicants and lower the quality. That bias is simply not true. After my first seven years as dean, I reviewed the more than 150 tenure-track and tenured faculty members hired into the college. I sought to identify what most people would agree were the top one-third of these hires: those who had previously earned tenure at higher-ranked institutions, such as Harvard or Stanford; those who had received multiple offers of employment, including offers from higher-ranked departments; and those whose records had
simply been stunning, for example, at the time of promotion and tenure. For each faculty member, I sought to identify the most significant factor or, if there were more than one, the multiple factors that led these faculty members to choose Notre Dame. The Catholic mission, broadly understood, was far and away the most significant, by a two-to-one margin, over the next highest factor. Distinction can be a great competitive advantage. The exercise was useful because mission hiring is often viewed by chairpersons as a third hurdle after quality and diversity. When one adds, for example, Catholicism to the mix, it may seem unduly complex and constraining, but one can take a different view and suggest that by stressing our Catholic mission, we could hire above our level.

Still, the concern on the part of faculty is not completely unwarranted, and it relates to the flip side of distinction. Our admissions office did a marketing study soon after I became dean and asked high school juniors to list up to three words they associated with seven different universities. Notre Dame was on the list along with six peer private universities. Students listed only two words for Notre Dame: “religion” and “sports.” The students were then given brochures on the seven universities and time to review them. They were again asked to identify up to three terms for each university. Notre Dame was the only one of the seven for which students did not write the word “academics.” They persisted with “religion” and “sports.” If one or the other aspect of a complex identity becomes more recognizable than others, one needs to shift priorities on campus, adjust marketing materials, or both. Still, it is a manageable problem, and it is better to be distinctive than unrecognized. As multiple presidents and former presidents have noted on their visits to Notre Dame, most universities would love to have the trademark recognition that a university such as Notre Dame enjoys.

Despite the diversity of American higher education, one could argue that even more diversity would be welcome, for example, more associate degree programs for less academically minded students who are seeking a combination of basic liberal arts skills and technical training in practical fields, ideally combined with work experience. Germany, with its dual system of vocational education and apprenticeships, is far superior in training persons to become masters of a technical trade. Research makes evident that the German school-to-work system is better at ensuring employment for young persons and serving the needs of employers and society (Rosenbaum). It is also one of the factors in the enviable success of Germany’s Mittelstand, its midsized manufacturers. In offering this option, Germany is more diverse, and in this diversity is better.

The greatest challenge to diversity may well involve the following paradox: Universities often feel a compulsion to become diverse internally, which is a value, but if, in the name of internal diversity, a university were to lose its distinction against the competition, then the diversity of American higher education would be reduced on a broader, national scale. The greatest brake on such homogenizing tendencies is a clearly expressed vision and effective socialization of faculty members.
The success of the American university has created new complexities relating to institutional diversity, because institutions often shift their missions and seek to race after the most prestigious colleges and universities, which have powerful allure. When institutional missions differ, some of the problems noted in the first chapter can be addressed by the variety of American colleges and universities, yet the tendency exists simply to imitate those that garner the highest rankings. The result is often less diversity in goals and greater diversity in quality. Despite their formal skills, career academic administrators who move from one institution to another may be less attuned to local history and distinction. As academic leadership positions become more complex and fraught with nonacademic demands on one’s time, many faculty members shy away from pursuing leadership positions at their own universities. Some who do take on such positions are not prepared to deal with the onslaught of nonacademic issues before them or are disturbed by the rapid-fire pace that allows precious little time for contemplation. More and more leadership positions are taken by persons who have never been faculty members and who think more of branding than of having a distinctive mission, more of the financial bottom line than of academic quality.

The complexity of the leadership challenge is especially great at religious colleges and universities (Heft). Leaders of such universities must not only fulfill the generic expectations of academic leadership, they must have a special sensibility for the distinctive religious mission; that narrows the pool of candidates still further. Presidents of Catholic universities are more often than not laypersons and not priests, brothers, or sisters of the founding religious order (Morey and Holtschneider 3; Greene 125). On average these leaders have less knowledge of the Catholic tradition—intellectual, moral, and social—than their religious predecessors and tend to be less prepared for the challenges of engaging students not simply in their academic and intellectual development but also in their religious and personal formation (Morey and Holtschneider 14–15; Morey and Piderit). If the academic leaders of Catholic colleges and universities, especially the presidents, are not prepared, they will struggle, not least of all in having to deal with a range of complex matters: for example, wrestling with the role of mission in faculty hiring and articulating the role of mission within the academic life of the university, justifying to parents and students an unusual set of core requirements, guiding and overseeing distinctive extracurricular programs, handling criticisms from the different and often polarizing strands within Catholicism, and ensuring that new board members and advisory council members are appropriately educated into the distinctive mission along with its opportunities and challenges.

Two Sample Visions

What might a sample vision look like? Let’s look briefly at two counter-cultural examples, a vision for a Catholic university in a predominantly secular academy and a vision for the liberal arts within a broader culture that tends to reduce education to job preparation.
A Vision for a Catholic University

Notre Dame has a storied past. In the 1920s, when Catholic immigrants were mainly poor, and anti-Catholicism was widespread, the remarkable success of the football team gave Catholics a rallying cry and an elevated sense of collective identity (Sperber). In those days college football games were among the nation’s biggest sporting events, and Notre Dame won often and against the best teams. Notre Dame’s games were broadcast across the nation by radio during the age of the radio, and they filled the largest stadiums in New York City and Chicago, with the team playing before more than 120,000 fans (Thelin 128). “The Notre Dame Victory March” became, and remains, one of the nation’s best known songs (Sperber 24). The legendary coach Knute Rockne became so famous that a successful Hollywood movie of his life was made in 1940. After Notre Dame’s initial success and acclaim in football, the university began to acquire a national academic reputation, an effort led most formidably across a stretch of thirty-five postwar years by its president, Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, an advisor to many presidents as well as popes.

When articulating my vision as dean, I felt the need to address the specifically Catholic dimension of Notre Dame. Why? I noticed when I arrived that most of the faculty were uneasy speaking about Notre Dame’s Catholic character. They wanted to hide it or downplay it. First, they recognized that a Catholic university was an aberration among leading research universities. In a university climate where religion is associated with what is less than fully intellectual and academic, the concern arose that a Catholic university is an oddity. Faculty coming from secular universities, even Catholic faculty, had no sensibility for what might distinguish a Catholic university. Second, our faculty were not blind to the darker moments of the Catholic tradition. The Catholic Church has not been without corruption and authoritarianism. It has occasionally undermined the concept of individual responsibility, acted irrationally in the face of the advances of science, failed to rise to the challenges of the modern world, and fallen short of its moral ideals. Church doctrine has not always been in harmony with reason, and although Christianity helped awaken the concept of universal human rights, the Catholic Church has not always acted in accordance with those ideals. Many persons, even today, have suffered from these retrograde moments, and the Church has often been its own worst enemy, even if, as a result of Vatican II, the Church has made an effort to acknowledge and learn from its shortcomings and mistakes. Third, a few years before my arrival, there had been heated debates about Notre Dame’s Catholic identity, which included some voices arguing that we needed a quota of Catholic faculty members. This, of course, made faculty who were of other faiths or nonreligious uncomfortable, not to mention Catholics who justly did not want to compromise on quality. As a result, many lost confidence in speaking about our distinctive identity.

A broader reason for our local crisis and embarrassment was that an easily identifiable vision for a Catholic university no longer existed. What makes a Catholic university distinctive? Two previous definitions were outdated. Initially, the presence of the animating religious order, in the case of Notre Dame, the Congregation of Holy Cross, made the Catholic presence
manifest, but for decades dwindling numbers meant the founding religious order was no longer
the driving force of distinctive identity. Another antiquated vision was Thomism, which,
however, lacked the capacity to integrate new developments in the sciences and the subtlety for
contemporary questions. Thomism had been abandoned as too dry and technical, too remote
from the present, mere memory work (Gleason 297–304). Three other models were subsequently
proposed, but they too were insufficiently compelling: they were too narrow. A vibrant
residential life, with liturgies in the dorms and retreats, enhances formation and collective
religious experience; however, residential life by itself is not intellectual enough and not
necessarily holistic. Similar issues accompanied the assignment of Catholic identity to
community service. Outreach programs to the disadvantaged are important, but these are not
uniquely Catholic and not always linked to academic concerns. In addition, service is only one
aspect of Catholicism. Finally, some universities invested in their theology departments or in
Catholic studies programs, but these foci can also redirect the Catholic mission to a single unit
and take other departments off the hook, when the ultimate task of theology is to integrate
advances in the individual disciplines and encourage those disciplines to ask deeper, even
ultimate questions. In short, the crisis of confidence was the crisis of an animating vision.

A further factor for my wanting to address the idea of a Catholic university was that for
most of my tenure as dean, I interviewed every finalist for jobs in the arts, humanities, and social
sciences. With more than forty searches per year and, on average, three finalists per search, that
involved about 120 interviews per year over a few concentrated months—more than 1,000
interviews over time. Those interviews covered the candidate’s scholarship, teaching, and
potential fit for the university. One question we called the mission question: How might
candidates contribute to Notre Dame’s Catholic mission, broadly understood? Or put another
way, what about Notre Dame’s distinctive identity attracts them? The goal was to ask an open-
edended question that allowed for an almost inexhaustible number of possible responses, but an
inability to engage the question in any meaningful way was a sobering sign. We had been hoping
to uncover faculty who would contribute to one or more of the distinctive aspects of a Catholic
university—for example, by engaging students in spiritual questions, helping them develop as
persons, focusing on social justice challenges, or exploring larger questions of ultimate meaning.
What I discovered again and again was that the candidates simply knew too little about the idea
of a Catholic university or about Notre Dame’s distinction. I ended up offering some
perspectives on the idea of a Catholic university, and I realized that the vision I was developing
appealed to candidates almost independently of their religious backgrounds.

Notre Dame could best compete with the top secular universities, I argued, not by
imitating them but by drawing attention to our uniqueness as a strength. A university that is
academically eminent and also distinctively Catholic is not common, and contributing to that
sense of distinctive mission can be a powerful motivator for every member of the community.

During the summer after my second year as dean, the president, provost, and deans had a
retreat to discuss our distinctive mission. I outlined the few key points I had been sharing with
faculty candidates and was encouraged to develop them into a short essay. The purpose was to communicate our vision and help increase recognition that our Catholic mission, far from being a disadvantage, not only had intrinsic value but was our enduring competitive advantage. When I had written a draft and wanted some feedback from the faculty, my administrative assistant sent out an e-mail announcing the availability of the paper and a workshop. Literally in a matter of minutes, the workshop, set for some thirty-five faculty members, was filled. There was a hunger to gain clarity on these questions, so essential to our mission. My reflections resulted in a short book entitled *The Intellectual Appeal of Catholicism and the Idea of a Catholic University*.

After making reference to some of the problems in the Catholic tradition that have given rise to modern suspicions, I addressed four principles that, I believe, should animate a Catholic university. I focused on those dimensions that, while true to the Catholic tradition, might also appeal to secular scholars and scholars from other religious traditions: first, Catholicism’s universalism and intentionalism; second, its sacramental vision, that is, the idea that the divine is present in this world; third, Catholicism’s elevation of tradition and reason; and finally, its emphasis on the unity of knowledge. I will not repeat that vision here but will instead simply note that it helped guide my work as dean. It has since been used to help prospective faculty members enter the conversation of what a Catholic university can and might be.

Not only in general but very specifically, vision helped to guide me. In the book I identified three issues with profound implications for coming generations that deserve special consideration at a Catholic university, and I directed funding, incentives, and time toward those purposes. First, the general crisis of values and orientation, resulting from the partly legitimate abandonment of previous value traditions; from cultural changes; and from complex developments in science, technology, the global economy, and world politics. Second, the increasing gap between developed and developing countries, a topic of great concern to a universalist religion. Third, the ecological crisis, which can be addressed only by truly collaborative work and which is intimately connected to both the crisis of values and relations between developed and developing countries. When articulating the ideal of a Catholic university, one needs to find language that, on the one hand, appeals to persons of diverse backgrounds and faiths and, on the other hand, ensures that distinctively Catholic dimensions are fully integrated. Too much Catholic rhetoric can alienate faculty members of another or no faith tradition. To say too little is to lose the distinction. It is not simply a matter of rhetoric; the challenge is to articulate a conceptual ideal that is intellectually compelling and attractive to persons who are not Catholic and, at the same time, is deeply Catholic. That such a vision will not appeal to everyone is, however, a given and simply the necessary consequence of distinction.

*A Vision for the Liberal Arts*

A vision may arise from a new and dynamic direction, but just as frequently it emerges out of necessity and a sense of crisis. Already Plato recognized that calls for legitimacy tend to surface only after a framework has begun to crumble or at least become vulnerable. In the early
decades of the twentieth century, about 70 percent of US undergraduates majored in the liberal arts; today the figure is more in the range of 36 to 44 percent, depending on which disciplines one includes (Brint et al. 155–56; Natl. Center for Educ. Statistics, Digest, table 322.10). Beyond the premier liberal arts colleges, which are likely to thrive indefinitely, liberal arts colleges that are less selective and much more dependent on tuition dollars have required a compelling vision.

My own reflections on the liberal arts, published in a book called *Why Choose the Liberal Arts?*, resulted from a concern about three factors that seemed to threaten the liberal arts. First, when I became dean, Notre Dame had a high number of business majors. With my colleagues I introduced a series of initiatives to reduce the number, and we succeeded, lowering business majors for ten straight semesters. This book developed out of the story I was telling parents when they asked, “What can my child do with a major in philosophy?” I wanted to make the case to both parents and students that a liberal arts education could meet their practical concerns about employment, that it is superb preparation for a career in any number of fields, including business.

Second, although I could recognize this practical value, I was disturbed by the ways in which so many Americans were reducing the purpose of higher education to merely practical ends. The national debate on undergraduate education had been—and continues to be—overwhelmingly about job preparation. I wanted to make the case that an arts and sciences education can be defended first and foremost as an end in itself; that is, it is of value for its own sake independently of its preparation of students for eventual employment and citizenship.

Third was my sense that the idea of moral formation was disappearing from the landscape of American higher education. College catalogues tend to mention the concept still, but faculty are less supportive. Their main focus is disciplinary learning and critical thinking. Understandable reasons exist for this bracketing of character and virtue, but even more compelling counterarguments are available. I wanted to argue that not only should a liberal arts education help students develop virtues of character and a sense of higher purpose, we as faculty members were in many ways already invested in this mission even as we denied it.

In *Why Choose the Liberal Arts?*, I consider three partly overlapping grounds for a liberal arts education: first, its intrinsic value, or the distinction of learning for its own sake, the sheer joy associated with exploring the life of the mind and asking the great questions that give meaning to life; second, the cultivation of those intellectual virtues that are requisite for success beyond the academy, a liberal arts education as preparation for a career; and third, character formation and the development of a sense of vocation, the connection to a higher purpose or calling. Exploration of these three values—the intrinsic, the practical, and the idealistic—constitute the core of the vision, which was a guiding force as I sought ways to improve learning at Notre Dame.
Parameters of Change

Change can come in varying levels of intensity. Cosmetic change involves surface alterations, for example, renaming a position or process, that do not address underlying and external constraints. Normally, such activity consists of busywork. Cosmetic change tends to be a subterfuge that avoids fundamental issues and so simply cultivates business as usual.

Incremental change involves modest adjustments over a long period. It allows a university to become better slowly, but in the meantime other universities are improving as well, some quite aggressively and quickly. So from a competitive standpoint, one does not move ahead but at best stays in place or, more likely, falls behind.

Transformative change—confronting challenges directly, making significant changes, and seeking major advances—is the most radical form of change and is necessary for any university that wants to compete. It alone demands a compelling vision.

Transformative change is not only the most desirable but also the most difficult. To be successful, it must satisfy at least four conditions. First, a clear and compelling vision must be a guiding constant amid rapid change. A lack of vision is problematic insofar as change without a telos is threatening. Indeed, rapid change without a guiding vision may well be worse than no change at all. Change and innovation cost time, so without a persuasive rationale, one can expect resistance from faculty, who legitimately desire to focus on teaching and research and not to lose time and energy on unimportant structural and administrative issues. Second, one needs courage to introduce and bring forward transformative change that addresses the big and potentially contentious issues that most would prefer to avoid. Third, one needs a certain level of support from the faculty, the core of the university. Fourth, one needs to ensure that the changes reinforce one another and integrate well to serve the larger vision or goal.

As one introduces change, one must ask two distinct questions: First, what is the highest priority? Second, what is most realizable? By sifting those two dimensions together, one can advance the most important changes that can indeed be realized. Essentially, this involves combining a sense of vision and priorities with knowledge of the lay of the land, that is, the normative and descriptive spheres. Still, if something is a major priority and support is mixed, one must have the courage to lead and move ahead despite resistance. In such cases, one must listen carefully to counterobjections. Greater support can come after disagreement as long as one has listened well and either adjusted the policy in the light of valid objections or made clear the rationale for one’s final choice.
References


