

BUILDING AS NOUN AND VERB

The Provost's Address to the Faculty

University of Dayton 11 September 2009

Preface

Good afternoon.

I appreciate President Curran's sensitive and carefully considered appraisal of our present concerns, and his positive view of our future. As he has explained, we have good reason to be grateful for our strength and resilience during difficult times. Although we stand on relatively firm ground, and while we see a promising future before us, our city and our region have been particularly hard hit by the current crisis. Our Marianist mission calls us to be present, active, and steadfast in helping our larger community. We are, after all, the University of *Dayton*.

As a comprehensive university, the wealth of our intellectual resources can and should be brought to bear on the task of lending assistance in creative and constructive ways to the recovery of our community. And as we look to our region, we must also look further outward to an equally troubled and challenged world. Such work, at home and abroad, would distinguish us as a progressive and engaged institution of higher education. More importantly, it would strengthen our ability to prepare our students to live and work in highly diverse, intercultural environments, and to acquire the skills that would enable them to serve others.

Before I begin the main part of my address, I would like to reflect for a moment on the broader nature of our shared academic purpose.

Universities exist for many reasons. One of these, perhaps the most important, is to make us aware that things beyond the narrow limits of our own experience really do matter.

No one here has a personal memory of November 11, 1918, let alone anything before that date. Few if any of you will recall at firsthand the news of December 7, 1941 or August 6, 1945. More of you, though still a relatively small minority, will remember November 22, 1963. But everyone here will know exactly where you were and what you were doing when it was morning in New York City, Washington D.C., and Shanksville Pennsylvania on today's date eight years ago.

A good education teaches us that the meanings of dates and the events they mark are multi-faceted, constantly changing, and connected with many other things. They are always open to further inquiry and interpretation. In order truly to understand anything, we must look at it from many different points of view. And nowhere will you find a greater, richer, and more accessible variety of vantage points in dialogue with one another than at a comprehensive university.

Because you know that genuine learning must take into account this complexity and variety and subtlety, you enable your students to reflect, analyze, and debate. You teach them to bring critical appraisal and contextual awareness to any topic. And you challenge them to engage in this process every day, with everything they encounter. That is why we are here. And that is why we must increase our ability to take full advantage of the transformative potential of this comprehensive university.

Let me conclude this reflection by noting that our Catholic intellectual tradition teaches us that learning is a process of integrating knowledge. My goal this afternoon is to challenge us to take greater advantage of our status as a comprehensive university to do exactly that: to integrate knowledge and cultivate learning across disciplines, across units, and across the greater community in which we live.

It is my privilege to welcome you to the start of a new academic year. This is always a moment of particular promise and potential, a time of opportunity and renewal. It is a day to reflect on our responsibility to our students, to one another, and to the common enterprise of learning that we undertake together.

Since I spoke with you last year, I was appointed to serve as your Provost. I am honored by the trust that President Curran and you have placed in me, and I am committed to earning that trust anew every day. Thank you.

A year ago, as *Interim* Provost, I spoke about the Roman architect Vitruvius. I did so as a structural engineer with a lifelong involvement with buildings. I noted that Vitruvius defined the essential elements of a good building as firmness, commodity, and delight. I explained why I believe these attributes are equally applicable to a good university. In our current economic circumstances, I strongly believe that they still apply. The edifice of our University is soundly constructed on a firm foundation. We accommodate a wide diversity of individuals and fields of knowledge. We are able to address with confidence the challenges we face. Above all, we remain positive about our future.

I may be your new provost, but I am still Joe Saliba, and I am *still* a structural engineer. So it may not surprise you that this year I would like to talk about building once again. This time, however, I will talk about building as a verb rather than a noun. I want to talk about building this comprehensive university as our shared professional workplace, our community, and, in many ways, our home. In particular, I will share my thoughts on building a curriculum and on building our greatest resource: you, our faculty. These two topics, and the various relationships between them, are rich with potential in the context of this particular university. Although UD is clearly a comprehensive university, we rarely discuss it in these terms, and we have done relatively little to fulfill, or even to explore, the opportunities that being such an institution afford us. It is therefore my purpose today to address the two major assets that we must build, the curriculum and the faculty, in order to build in turn the new and better academic community that we are capable of becoming.

First, **Building a Curriculum.**

I have heard the proposed Common Academic Program, or CAP, described as too radical, too conservative, overdue, timely, too late, a great idea, and a train wreck. So far I

haven't heard it described as a towering cathedral of learning or a collapsing house of cards. These latter analogies would at least be closer to my theme of building and my perspective as a structural engineer. Seriously, when I started to read the faculty responses to the proposal, I began to wonder whether everyone had actually been reading the same document.

I was truly impressed by the high level of analytical thinking that you brought to the task of examining the CAP proposal. This vigorous debate was exactly what we had hoped to inspire with the work that was produced by Associate Dean Don Pair of the College and his committee of colleagues from across our campus. I thank Don and the CAP committee for their work in beginning this valuable conversation.

I believe that General Education has served us well for many years. Nevertheless, it is time to revise how we conceive of a general curriculum for our students. I am well aware of the constraints we have imposed on ourselves through patterns, practices, and habits that we have institutionalized. But it is literally impossible to develop a curriculum that is truly new if we insist that it must be tailored to fit infrastructure that is already in place. It is exceedingly difficult to think creatively, let alone to act boldly, when one is bound by such constraints.

We all do our best to ensure that our students learn the subjects that we teach. But I think we need to devote more of our attention to enabling our students to *learn how to learn*. Of course this should be accomplished through discipline-specific and even subject-specific instruction, but we are mistaken if we believe that our students have an innate ability to discern and explore relationships that will take them beyond the strict fulfillment of requirements.

We need to build a curriculum that features greater integration and less separation of disciplines, one that offers creative, adaptable approaches to learning that are responsive to students who are preparing to live and work in a diverse, global environment. I hope to see more flexibility, more openness to variations, more innovative ideas, and more

evidence of collaboration. The proposed Common Academic Program points us in this direction, but we can and must go further. This summer Pat Donnelly, Margie Pinnell, and Danielle Poe served as a task force that evaluated your many responses to the CAP. In a short while, David Darrow, President of our Academic Senate, will discuss the next steps in our efforts to build this centrally important curriculum.

I realize that the proposed CAP represents only one-third of a student's entire academic program, and that this third is typically regarded as a set of onerous requirements to be "gotten out of the way" in order to devote attention to one's major. I cannot emphasize too strongly how great a mistake this perspective is, and how essential it is for us to reject its perpetuation. The CAP, or whatever it may ultimately be called, should be the synthesizing element in every program, the fundamental structure on which all else depends, the unifying framework that extends throughout the entire four years of the typical undergraduate career. Again, the initial proposal pointed us in this direction. In the next stage of this process, let us build on and go beyond what we have seen to date. Let us engage, creatively and with purpose, the whole of our comprehensive university.

I urge you to take this task seriously. I ask all of you to be engaged in the process of reenergizing and reinvigorating our core curriculum. I know that we have many other, urgent, daily demands that compete for our attention, but we need to make the time to focus on our future. We need to keep foremost in mind what the real purpose of a Common Academic Program is. We need to consider how it will affect not just what students learn but how they learn. And we will need to examine how they will construct meaning from what they learn. All of this will also affect how we as faculty must think afresh about how we enable students to learn. Which leads me logically to the matter of **Building a Faculty.**

It is we, the faculty, who will determine what will work best and how it will work to the best advantage of all. And if the curriculum is to be new, we, the faculty, must think and act anew in order to fulfill this worthy goal. I would therefore like to consider how we can build a faculty of individuals who are actively and positively responsive to a

Common Academic Program, and who see their work in that program as stimulating and deeply worthwhile.

Building a faculty is a process that is continuous, complex, and fluid. The most obvious part of this process is bringing on new members. This may seem obvious, but consider an intriguing fact. It may surprise you to learn that, at this moment, more than 40% of you have been at UD for 7 years or less. 40% of you; 7 years or less. By next year, projections indicate that the percentage represented by this group will constitute a slim majority. Why is this important? Because the task of building a curriculum and reinvigorating our comprehensive university cannot be accomplished solely with senior faculty. It requires the active and creative participation of all of us. It is this collective resource of junior and senior faculty alike that provides us with an extraordinary opportunity for building this comprehensive university.

We have devoted a great deal of attention to hiring a diverse and high quality faculty. We are extremely fortunate to have this wealth of fresh energy and new ideas. We are equally fortunate to have the experience and wisdom, the insight and the institutional memory of those who have dedicated themselves to making UD the distinguished university it is today. The different sets of attributes that junior and senior faculty offer are not in conflict with one another; rather they complement one another. And it is this mutually beneficial and complementary relationship that offers us the resources for building a new sense of how we can work together in a comprehensive campus environment.

Of course, we do not build a faculty simply by hiring new members into our ranks. We support our faculty in their teaching and research, and we provide many opportunities for what we conventionally refer to as faculty development. The building of a faculty that I am proposing today would take this process further. The next step beyond our firm foundation in faculty hiring and development is to explore and put into practice a new concept of the comprehensive university. Let me explain what I mean by this.

A comprehensive university should be much more than a collection of different schools and a variety of programs at different levels. It should be a place in which faculty and students work within but also across departments and other units. It needs to be a place where this is done intentionally, purposefully, creatively, consistently, and as a matter of course. In an enlightened comprehensive university—and I'm not sure that one really exists—all learning would be contextualized through its relationships with issues and subjects beyond the narrow confines of particular disciplines. More than this, it would be contextualized beyond the boundaries of strictly academic thinking and the campus itself. Such a comprehensive university would be an institution consciously committed to learning that is integrated, innovative, always changing, ever adapting to opportunities and circumstances, even as it maintains and celebrates its foundational values and traditions.

To achieve this kind of university, sound structures and legitimate practices that have served us admirably for decades may have to be radically altered or even cleared away. Tensions and conflicts between conservative and progressive approaches to learning are unavoidable, but if they are addressed collegially, they can be highly constructive. Frankly, it is our job to work through these tensions and conflicts thoughtfully and with our minds open to opportunities for growth. This is how we will construct and work within a truly comprehensive university. And this is how we will deliver on the promise of an integrated Common Academic Program. Let me emphasize that these two concepts, the comprehensive university and the Common Academic Program must be thoroughly integrated. The one cannot exist without the other. Neither can thrive if we do not invigorate both.

We have at this university many outstanding faculty, excellent courses, and wonderful students. We do not, however, have the kind of infrastructure that is capable of bringing these components together with the kind of fruitful creativity and flexibility that I envision. I believe, however, that we have the kind of institutional culture—a culture of dialogue and a commitment to do what is best for our future—that will enable us to build this kind of comprehensive university. The primary academic challenge before us is not

so much the creation of a curriculum or the building of a faculty for their own sake, but the development of ways of thinking through and implementing an innovative campus culture that will make it possible for a truly new and meaningful curriculum to be constructed and sustained by a faculty that is actively and imaginatively engaged across this institution.

In **conclusion**, I wish to acknowledge that fulfilling this vision will be a major and difficult task. It will not happen overnight, and it is impossible to predict exactly how it will ultimately work. As I have said, I am unaware of any model for this in higher education. But I am confident that, if we put our minds to it, the University of Dayton can take the lead in designing the kind of exciting, stimulating, vital, and rewarding comprehensive university that I have talked about this afternoon.

You and I know that our students are being formed in a world that is very different from the one that shaped us. And we must educate them to enter a world that will be different still from the one they know right now. This calls upon us to stretch ourselves beyond what is familiar. It requires us to be both pragmatic and visionary in the time-honored tradition of the Marianists who founded this University and responded over and over again to changing times.

Let us not forget that our University of Dayton is an entirely different place than the small boys' school that the Marianists started in 1850; at the same time, it remains true to their greater vision. In this same spirit of change and adaptation, I envision a University of Dayton that is radically different from the one we inherited, and radically different from the one we have today. To create such a place would be the truest fulfillment of our heritage. We honor those who came before us most fully when we transform ourselves, as they did. I am interested in seeing us become in living reality the comprehensive university that, up until now, we have been only in the abstract.

Ask yourselves and ask one another, how can we think and work more collaboratively? How can we be more responsive to the needs of today without losing our bearings from the past? How can we be more agile, more experimental, and less bureaucratic? How can we move from our department-centered structures and thought patterns to multidisciplinary initiatives? Again, let me be clear that I want to hear your ideas for transforming this University, and your plans for working together to make it happen. And I want particularly to involve the almost-majority of you who have been here fewer than 8 years, in addition to those with many years of dedicated service.

As Dr. Darrow will explain, we have established several working groups to guide the next stages of the CAP process. But I want to emphasize that this process is not just their responsibility. I am asking for your help, all of you, in thinking together and working together, and not just on CAP, but also on the greater enterprise, of which CAP is just one key part. I invite all of you to talk with your colleagues about ways in which you might invigorate one another's teaching and/or research. I am asking you to have these conversations not just within your departments or even just within your units. Spread your ideas all across this institution. Commit yourselves to the task of building a curriculum and building a faculty. I invite you to create opportunities for making vital and real the full potential of a comprehensive university that is distinctly our own. In other words, I am asking you to build a new University of Dayton.

Thank you.