Daniel J. Curran traveled to China in the spring of 2002 with an eye on the future. The cadence of the trip itself was familiar—an academic exchange filled with formalities to help bridge a cultural divide. But this time, just two months before he would become the University of Dayton’s 18th president, Curran envisioned a grander path of globalization.

He traveled with Fred Pestello, who was provost at the University of Dayton, and Greg Dell’Omo, associate vice president at Saint Joseph’s University in Philadelphia, where Curran served as executive vice president and vice president for academic affairs. As Curran participated in a signing ceremony between the University of Dayton and Nanjing University, a ritual that signals the start of a relationship, Pestello leaned over to Dell’Omo and whispered, “Can he do that? He isn’t even president yet.”

“Welcome to the world of Dan Curran,” replied Dell’Omo, who is now president of Rider University in Lawrenceville, New Jersey.

Bold and strategic, high-energy and personable, Curran doesn’t like to wait. He had a vision for the future of higher education, a streak of impatience and the tenacity to make things happen—characteristics that would enable him to bring meaningful change to the University as it embarked on a new millennium.

“It was clear that Dan was going to be an ambitious president who was going to...
push the University in new and exciting direc-
tions,” recalls Pestello, who is now president
of Saint Louis University. “Today, there are
hundreds and hundreds of Chinese students
studying at the University of Dayton as a result
of the initiatives that began with that first trip
in 2002.”

The China visit, the first of many in Cur-
ran’s 14-year tenure, set the stage for his presi-
dency’s an era in which the University of
Dayton opened to the world and experienced
unprecedented growth. Curran brought a global perspective — and
so much more.

His legacy can be summed up most easily by the numbers. From
7,000 undergraduate applicants to nearly 17,000. From 42 under-
graduate international students to 939. From a campus of 212 acres to 388
acres. From $47.5 million in spon-
sored research to $98.6 million.
From an endowment of $254 million
to $500.4 million. While other uni-
versities had cutbacks and furloughs
during the Great Recession, the
University of Dayton had its pick of
top-choice candidates, growing the
faculty while expanding diversity, ac-
ademic depth and program breadth.

During Curran’s tenure, the Uni-
versity adapted its academic pro-
gram to meet the changing times. It
launched the nation’s first acceler-
law degree; started physical therapy doc-
toral and physician assistant practice master’s
programs; introduced one of the nation’s first
bachelor’s degrees in human rights studies;
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launch...
brought him closer to students — serving as director of first-year orientation and academic adviser of the men’s and women’s basketball teams. Eventually, Curran moved into leadership posts dean, vice president for academic affairs, executive vice president.

When the University of Dayton began its presidential search in 2001, the search firm contacted Curran, but it wasn’t the right time. The president of Saint Joseph’s had just been diagnosed with a serious illness, and Curran and Renzetti were building their dream house and hadn’t even moved in.

But the search failed to identify a suitable candidate, someone who could connect with faculty, staff and students and shepherd the University through the emerging challenges of higher education while remaining true to the Marianist tradition. The recruiter contacted Curran again, and he agreed to visit.

Curran, Renzetti and their two boys came to campus just before Christmas in 2001. They met three times with then-President Brother Raymond L. Fitz, S.M. ’64. “I was struck by how humble he was and his emphasis on community,” recalls Curran. He also saw a university with a strong base for growth.

In February 2002, Curran accepted the offer and would be installed in July. At the formal installation the following spring, the University of Dayton president, Father Gene Contadino, S.M. ’62, gave Curran in July. At the formal installation the following spring, the University of Dayton president, Father Gene Contadino, S.M. ’62, gave Curran a lapel pin that the Marianists had designed for him. It features the University’s chapel dome and the Marianist cross.

“He went out of his way to do this to say, ‘You’re part of the Marianist family,’” says Curran, who wears the pin every day. “From the very beginning, I felt the Marianists were around me all the time. You never feel alone.”

At the same time, Curran had the freedom to act decisively and make the changes he felt the University needed to remain competitive. He moved with the swiftness of a CEO, not the customary pace of an academic. That came as a bit of a jolt to the faculty and staff, who had yet to give accustomed to his style.

Both Keyes, vice president for facilities and campus operations, recalls that shortly after his arrival, Curran shared his concerns about the look and feel of the campus. Why were trucks parked in the center of campus? And what about those dreadful tennis courts, surrounded by a chain-link fence? The core of the campus should be a unifying spot for students, he said.

“The day early on that just a passing comment from him is not a passing comment,” Keyes says. The trucks and tennis courts were soon moved, replaced by an expansive grassy mall — and later, a statue of Marianist founder Blessed William Joseph Chaminade was added, donated by Curran and Renzetti.

In December 2002, just months after taking office, Curran told Keyes he wanted a new residence hall. It would provide updated space and enable the University to move students out of older buildings, which could then be renovated. It would contain classroom space and a bookstore.

“And he wanted it to open within 18 months. ‘There’s no way we can plan that and have it open in 18 months,’ Keyes remembers thinking. But Curran stayed firm. Instead of spending years just in design, the project moved to a speedier design-build process. Construction began on Marianist Hall in May 2003, and it opened in August 2004.

In fact, the timeline inspired the builders of ArtStreet to accelerate their work so the University could have it open in 18 months. “This is a critical opportunity for University of Dayton to invest in our future — and this region’s destiny,” he said.

No one was surprised that Curran had stepped forward to boost the region’s fortunes. He had served on the boards of numerous community organizations, including as chair of the Dayton Development Coalition and as a member of the Dayton Area Chamber of Commerce. “Dan is looked at throughout the community as one of the top leaders in the entire region,” says Jeff Hawkridge, ’81, president and CEO of the coalition. And the University “has been the economic driver that has changed the way people perceive the city of Dayton and the entire region,” he says.

For Curran, improving and expanding campus was part of a greater vision for the future. Most of the student body came from Ohio and the Midwest — a demographic that required both pragmatic reflection and swift action. Shortly after Curran was selected, he learned about ongoing negotiations for a 49-acre site owned by NCR Corp. that could greatly expand the campus. The catch: Part of the property was a “brownfield,” a former factory zone with contaminated soil and asbestos in the remaining buildings.

After much study, Curran recommended going forward with the $25 million purchase. The board of trustees agreed unanimously, and the sale was finalized in 2005. In partnership with the city of Dayton, the University obtained about $8.5 million from two Clean Ohio Revitalization Fund grants to assist in the cleanup. In 2010, he proudly announced that GE Aviation would open a major research facility there. This spring, Emerson Climate Technologies opened its own innovation center, The Helix, which it built on the site.

In 2009, with Dayton still reeling from the Great Recession, the city lost its largest company. While NCR announced its move to Georgia, the University underscored its commitment to the city by purchasing NCR’s former office building. The 115-acre site contained a sprawling building with 455,000 square feet of space. The University of Dayton Research Institute moved into the building. “This was an exceptional opportunity for University of Dayton to invest in our future — and this region’s destiny,” he said.

In 2002, the University approved plans for the Dayton Early College High School in Ohio, 10th in the nation, and one of the five most innovative high schools in the U.S., according to the Northwest Evaluation Association.

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MARCH 22, 2009 — University of Dayton Arena secures its place in history as the most-used venue for NCAA Division I Men’s Basketball Championship games. March Madness has kicked off at the Arena since 2007.

FEB. 23, 2010 — The University starts a string of four straight appearances on the President’s Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll, the highest federal recognition a college or university can receive for its commitment to addressing community needs through service learning and civic engagement.

APRIL 1, 2010 — The University ranks No. 1 among Catholic universities in the “Saviors of Our Cities” ranking. The University was singled out as the “most innovative of all engaged colleges and universities.”

APRIL 15, 2011 — GE Aviation breaks ground on the $73 million EPICenter—the first LEED-certified building on campus.

AUGUST 2011 — For the first time, the University enrolls more than 1,000 international students (undergraduate, graduate and Intensive English Program).

SEPTEMBER 2011 — The University unveils the Common Academic Program, an evolving, flexible undergraduate curriculum that is responsive to the changing times while remaining grounded in Catholic and Marianist intellectual traditions.

SEPTEMBER 2012 — The University announces a new tuition plan that discloses the true cost of a degree, abolishes fees and guarantees students no net-price increases from first year to graduation.

JULY 30, 2013 — Curran signs the American College and University Presidents’ Climate Commitment, committing the University to becoming carbon neutral.

APRIL 12, 2009 — Women’s basketball begins a season that will culminate in the team’s first NCAA tournament appearance. The team would win bids each year through 2015, when it reached the Elite Eight.

NOV. 20, 2010 — Men’s soccer wins the A-10 tournament. In 2015, it would advance to the second round of the NCAA tournament for the first time in program history.

NOVEMBER 2009 — Women’s basketball begins a season in which she fielded the University’s first fast-paced, low-turnover team. The team would win bids each year through 2015, when it reached the Elite Eight.

SEPTEMBER 2010 — The Dayton Business Journal announces Curran as one of the region’s most outstanding leaders for 2006. He would receive the award again in 2016.

MAY 18, 2006 — The Ohio Board of Regents approves a Doctor of Physical Therapy degree program to prepare students for well-paying jobs in a growing health care field and help alleviate a shortage of physical therapists in the Dayton region. The program would welcome its first students in August.

JAN. 24, 2007 — The Dayton Development Coalition names Curran the region’s most outstanding leader for 2006. He would receive the award again in 2016.

MARCH 29, 2014 — Men’s basketball reaches the Elite Eight of the NCAA Division I Men’s Basketball Championship.

MARCH 2016 — The University announces a new master’s degree program in sustainability education, recognizing its long-standing commitment to community engagement through teaching, service, research and partnerships.

MAY 7, 2015 — The Ceramic Foundation selects the University for its 2015 Community Engagement Classification, recognizing its long-standing commitment to community engagement through teaching, service, research and partnerships.

JUNE 23, 2014 — Amanda Hanley makes a $12.5 million gift to support the China Institute and give it a permanent home.

JULY 29, 2014 — The University announces the largest first-year class in its history: 2,205.

MARCH 2008 — Men’s soccer wins the A-10 tournament. In 2015, it would advance to the second round of the NCAA tournament for the first time in program history.

OCT. 10, 2007 — The University becomes one of the first in the nation to create an undergraduate program in human rights studies. The University would open its Human Rights Center in 2015.

OCT. 9, 2007 — The University makes a $10 million gift to support student scholarships in the School of Education and Allied Professions, School of Business Administration and School of Engineering. It was the largest gift by an individual to date.

MARCH 27, 2009 — The University launches the University of Dayton Research Institute and give it a permanent home.

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SEPTEMBER 2017 — The University announces a new master’s degree program in sustainability education, recognizing its long-standing commitment to community engagement through teaching, service, research and partnerships.
Curran's move was “very Marianist,” says Curious Krame, professor of biology and president of the Academic Senate. “In a very true and tangible way, faculty have a seat at the table for strategic discussions,” she says.

Curran showed his comfort level with students when he attended a fall 2015 rally in support of students at the University of Missouri who had toppled their own president over a failure to adequately address racial tensions on campus.

“I’m here as a sign of solidarity with the students, faculty and staff,” Curran told a student reporter with Flyer News as they all braided themselves against a brisk wind out of the Central Mall outside Kennedy Union. “I think the statement they’re making about dignity is very important for the University of Dayton. It’s at the heart of our mission.”

When racial concerns have emerged in recent years at the University, Curran became directly involved and opened his office as an avenue to address the issues, says Mike Lofton ’05, vice president for partnerships for myEDmatch, a job-matching website for teachers and schools. “He’s never run away from any hard issue as it concerns students on campus,” he says.

Lofton was one of the first emissaries and vice president of the Student Government Association. Curran became a mentor and friend. “I look up to him so very much in all phases of life,” says Lofton, who is now on the board of directors of the University of Dayton Alumni Association.

In 2014, Curran waded into a very different student gathering when a celebratory throng poured out of houses and residence halls to party in the street after Dayton defeated Syracuse to advance to the Sweet 16 in the NCAA men’s basketball tournament. For a few moments, students held Curran aloft as they chanted “Dr. Dan! Dr. Dan!”

The incident made the national news.

“A person asked me, ‘Weren’t you frightened to walk into a crowd of students?’” Curran says. “No, it was a natural thing to do. It’s just not the way I’ve ever felt about the students. They care about me, and I care about them.”

When he steps down at the end of the academic year, Curran plans to take a yearlong sabbatical, which will include resumption of his academic work in China. A long-distance bicyclist, he has already checked out the bike shops in Suzhou.

As president, he says he finds his greatest joy in seeing the success of students, faculty and staff. Now he is looking forward to returning to the place where he began — the classroom.

It won’t be hard to find Professor Dan Curran at the University of Dayton. On game days, he’ll be in the stands, cheering for the Flyers. His contract as president included a clause guaranteeing him basketball tickets for life.

Otherwise, he’ll be doing what sociologists do: Studying concepts of social justice. Mentoring students. Building community. He’s ready for the next chapter.

“Who knows what the future brings?” says Curran.