

Transmission – Transaction - Transformation

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As President Curran has noted, we have invested a great deal of good work in a thoughtful consideration of our mission and identity. He has also explained that we have done so as a valuable reaffirmation of whom we are and in the spirit of continuous improvement. Today, as part of my own contribution to our discussion of mission and identity, I will ask all of us to reflect on what I believe should be the ultimate aim of a University of Dayton education.

The origins of UD date from 1850. We have always been Catholic and Marianist, and it is critically important that we always retain and celebrate this identity. Our learning-focused, residential center remains right here in Dayton, Ohio, even though our reach extends around the globe, especially thanks to President Curran's leadership. Here and abroad we are committed to providing the best quality education we can deliver, and we are united in our resolve to always improve upon our efforts. Our history is one of stability, depth, and continuity. Our future is one of promise, experimentation, and innovation. We are right to emphasize all of this when we speak of our mission and identity.

It is a common mistake in our profession to regard mission and identity as givens that are fixed in place. Too often institutions regard the process of examining mission and identity as little more than an exercise in proclaiming, "This is who we are and what we stand for." But such a limited view leaves out the most important part of the discussion, which is a consideration of mission and identity as creative forces and resources for shaping an institution's future.

To illustrate my point, it might be useful to draw our attention to a few things that were clearly not included in any articulation of mission and identity when the forerunner of our University was founded in the mid-19th century.

Our founders probably never imagined co-education, women and minority faculty, and students from diverse backgrounds who arrive here from all across America and from around the world. They clearly did not anticipate professional schools, graduate programs, or a nationally-ranked women's volleyball team. They certainly did not imagine a degree in human rights, or progressive programs in the visual and performing arts. And you can bet they never pictured a former soccer player from Lebanon, who is a structural engineer, standing here as Provost, giving an address about our mission, our identity, and our future. I am sure you could add other examples, but my abbreviated list will give you some idea of how much we have changed.

At the same time, I believe that, if the founders could see us now, they would recognize that we remain committed to educating the whole person, that we are still focused on developing relationships of care, and that we continue to believe in the integration of mind and heart.

Yet our University has evolved in many ways, and it is precisely because we have evolved that we need to ensure that we all have at least a baseline understanding of mission and identity in the sense of "This

is who we are and what we stand for.” But this understanding does not foreclose debate or stand in the way of meaningful change. Quite the opposite. Mission and identity invite discussion and call upon us to renew ourselves. As President Curran has articulated, mission and identity are strong but evolving dynamics of our University, and they should always be so.

Now, more than ever in the competitive world of higher education, we need to frame mission and identity not only by declaring who we are and what we stand for. We need to ask the open-ended question: “What could we become?” Only then can our examination of mission and identity be a meaningful process that engages us all in shaping our collective future. To summarize: The best reason for clarifying who we are—is to prepare us to consider what we might become.

At the core of my experience as a student, a faculty member, a department chair, a dean, and now as Provost, I have always understood that the primary commitment of our University is to the principle and practice of transformation. I have also understood that in order to transform the lives of our students, we must be constantly willing and able to transform ourselves.

Let me put this commitment to transformation in the perspective of this moment. There is no occasion more filled with promise than the arrival on campus each fall of new and returning students. All of us feel a fresh sense of possibility and a surge of energy in this annual August reawakening. Our own return as faculty – and the arrival of new colleagues – is also full of promise. With our solid preparation and our deep and continuing commitment as educators, we make it possible for our students to fulfill the potential that is their gift. Our work is to play a pivotal role in the lives of others. I ask you today to consider with me how we can best receive that gift of potential and respond to our calling as agents of transformation.

I have just articulated a major challenge for us to address together. As an engineer, I often respond to challenges, questions, and problems by using equations, so I will offer one here. $M + I = V$.

Mission + Identity = Vision.

In other words, the purpose of examining anew our mission and identity is to envision our future more clearly. But there is a subsequent and even more important equation that follows from this one. That is $V^2 = T$.

Vision squared equals Transformation.

Vision squared is vision amplified, extended, and focused. Vision squared multiplies our resources as a community of engaged scholars, teachers and students. Vision squared equals Transformation.

Building on the work of his predecessors, President Curran continues to transform our entire University and our growing reputation around the world. Dr. Curran’s achievements have given all of us greater opportunities to fulfill the purpose of this University, which is to transform the lives of our students so that they can, in turn, transform the world.

Given this fertile ground that President Curran continues to cultivate and literally to expand, how might all of us think constructively about transformation as an educational imperative? As I hope many of you will realize, I’ve actually been constructing this idea of transformative learning in previous addresses. I

have done so based on my understanding of mission and identity as a starting point for what we might become.

Four years ago, I discussed our University by employing three criteria for a sound building based on the work of the Roman architect Vitruvius. Vitruvius argued that a sound building needs stability, commodity, and delight. With Vitruvius in mind, I explored the idea of combining permanence with flexibility, which is exactly what we must do in order to fulfill our mission and identity.

The following year I spoke about building as a verb. I stressed the importance of building curriculum and building an engaged faculty because this is what we must do, continuously, if we are to flourish.

Two years ago I talked about the concept of an academic journey that is not exclusively about destinations. I put forward the idea that a university education is not just about reaching a specific goal; it is also about being aware of and responsive to what can happen along the way. Which is to say, it is about seeking opportunities for transformation.

Finally, last year I spoke about the Common Academic Program. I made it clear that I did not see the CAP as a fixed entity. I continue to insist that the CAP not become just a set of courses. It should be a field of possibilities and an ongoing, open-ended project of research and development.

I hope that this brief review of my previous addresses will recall some of the ideas on which I am building now.

Before I go any further, I will take a moment to object to the common cheapening of this word “transformation.” Calling this and that “transformative” has become a bit like referring to a perfectly ordinary event or TV show or snack food as “awesome.” When I say that our job is not merely to educate students but to help them transform their lives, I mean that literally.

At the most basic level, we are in the profession of transmitting information, and students come here to receive the information we transmit. Much of our energy is devoted to ensuring that the signal-to-noise ratio between teachers and students is as high on the signal side as we can manage.

Transmission can originate in a classroom or online. It can happen during a lecture or by reading a book. At its best, transmission is powerful, direct communication from a deeply informed and passionate person who makes it clear to the receiver that something is worth paying attention to. Even so, transmission and its reception are just the minimum. They are the starting points in the process of communication that we know as teaching and learning.

At the University of Dayton, we build on transmission and reception in order to move on to the more rewarding process of transaction. In the genuine dialogue that is transaction, we are interested in learning how our students think, not merely in training them as parrots that will repeat what we have told them. We insist that our students investigate, probe, inquire, and take nothing at face value. We challenge them to forego easy answers, to question assumptions, and to look beyond conventional wisdom. But we do this not only to cultivate critical thinking. We do this in order to cultivate constructive and creative and compassionate thinking and action as well.

It is at this more advanced stage of learning that our students see relationships between classroom discourse and the world beyond. They realize that not just what they have learned but also how they learn applies to their lives outside the university.

Transaction is, by definition, a participatory process of learning. Students and faculty together turn information and concepts around to examine as many facets of them as possible. They explore ways in which different ideas and points of view fit within larger frameworks of theory and experience. Transaction is the negotiation of information and understanding. It is through transaction that learning comes to life.

But just as transaction is an important step beyond transmission, so too is transformation a critical step beyond transaction. Transformation occurs when we acquire a sympathetic understanding of how someone might believe and think and behave, especially when we find their beliefs and thoughts and behaviors unfamiliar. We experience transformation when we apprehend and value the meaning of something we did not know before, and when we find ourselves changed in the process of doing so.

Through transformative learning, we understand ourselves and others in new ways. Our beliefs and our ways of thinking are altered, and we see and act in the world differently. A transformative education is one from which we emerge as a different person from the one we were before.

Consider the matter this way. Our tuition, our commitment to a residential campus, our class sizes, our promise of active engagement between students and faculty, and our dedication to educating the whole person are justified only if we provide transformational learning. For more than 150 years we have shaped a university that calls us to deliver, at a minimum, on the promise of transmission and transaction. Our mission and our identity, expressed in the spirit of “what we might become” commit us to providing transformative learning.

This kind of education is the real source of our distinction. It is the one attribute, more than any other that enables us to claim national and international prominence as a Catholic leader in higher education. Every one of us can play a vital role in transformational learning. When we do, the impact we have on our students is truly profound. It is that impact, on many lives, every year that defines who we are.

To be sure, our role as the faculty in this process is not easy. Let’s be honest in acknowledging this challenge. Many of our students come here to learn certain skills, to acquire information, to pass a sequence of courses, and to leave with a diploma. Many arrive thinking they are perfectly fine just as they are. Few students ask us to transform them. Even some of our best and brightest choose us because they have a sense of being at home on our campus. That sense of comfort is a good thing in some ways but problematic in others. It is problematic because it is our responsibility to challenge complacency, to cause some disorientation, and to reject indifference towards the potential for transformation.

This is hard work, but we must not be deterred by the sheer difficulty of changing lives. Transformative learning is our mission because it is the most important promise that arises from our identity.

Some of you have probably recognized a level of meaning in these words – transmission, transaction, and transformation – that goes beyond what I have been saying explicitly and that links these words implicitly to the central theme of this address. If we detach the prefix that these three words share in common – *trans* – we are left with three root words of particular importance to our common purpose: mission, action, and formation. Our mission must be fulfilled through action, and by taking informed and creative action, we contribute to the formation of our students’ lives and the future of this University. You will note that the central word in this causative sequence is action.

I will conclude my remarks on transformative learning by comparing UD to a bicycle. Not a conventional comparison, perhaps, but we should not be content to be a conventional university, even in our comparisons and metaphors.

A bicycle is a good image for any organization that seeks to be healthier, more energy efficient, and more environmentally responsible. Bicycles are good for us and good for the planet. But I have something else in mind: the bicycle as metaphor.

Any institution, such as ours, with a rich history and a singular identity that seeks to have a long and flourishing future must combine stability with movement. When you observe a bicycle fulfilling its purpose, you see that it is stable only when it is in forward motion. Without the crutch of a kickstand, a bicycle at rest is about as unstable a thing as you could find.

Learning to ride a bike requires an act of faith, but not the abandonment of reason. Getting underway for the first time can be frightening and disorienting. But there is such a promise of freedom and speed and independence that we figure it just might be worth falling a few times if that's what it takes. More importantly, we have to imagine ourselves riding the bicycle. And most importantly, we have to do it. Neither faith nor reason, alone or together, is quite enough. Once we have conquered our fears, we discover that the more confidently we move forward, the more stable we are. As we continue to move forward, we gain greater control. And in addition to making progress, we see the world anew.

I am sure I don't need to explain why I think this bicycle metaphor is relevant to our discussion of mission and identity and transformative learning. But just to be direct: We need to be stable. We need to move forward. We need to ensure our stability by moving forward with skill, with vision, with grace, with courage and daring, and with good reflexes. We cannot do this if we regard mission and identity as fixed or formulaic. A university focused too much on its past and too satisfied with its present condition is like a bicycle at rest, not fulfilling its purpose.

Mission and identity clarify our purpose, but it is up to us to fulfill that purpose. And I believe that our primary purpose is to deliver on the promise of transformational learning. This is what will make us a truly distinctive and genuinely transformative University of Dayton.
