

# Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

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Volume 39

Article 4

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2-1-2011

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### Recommended Citation

McFarland, S.J., Michael (2011) "Aspiring to be Great," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 39, Article 4.  
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol39/iss1/4>

# Aspiring to Be Great

We must only play to win

By Michael McFarland, S.J.

In his talk to leaders from Jesuit higher education institutions from around the world gathered in Mexico City last April, Fr. General Adolfo Nicolás threw out this challenge: “Can Jesuit universities today, with energy and creativity, continue the legacy of Jesuit learned ministry and forge intellectual bridges between Gospel and culture, faith and reason, for the sake of the world and its great questions and problems?” As he detailed in his talk, he sees a compelling need for Jesuit higher education to have a strong voice in the important intellectual debates and cultural movements of our day and a major impact on critical social issues, such as poverty, human rights and the environment.

This ambitious vision can only be realized if our institutions strive to maximize their impact in forming the next generation of leaders, becoming significant centers of intellectual life and serving as resources and animators for community development. This is the Jesuit principle of the *magis*, by which we always strive for the greater, not out of pride or ambition, but because we believe that what we do matters, and it must be done in the very best way possible. Every one of our institutions must aspire to be great, in a way that is appropriate to its time, place and circumstances; and that begins with our academic life, which is at the core of everything we do. Anything less is a betrayal of the mission we have been given by the Society of Jesus.

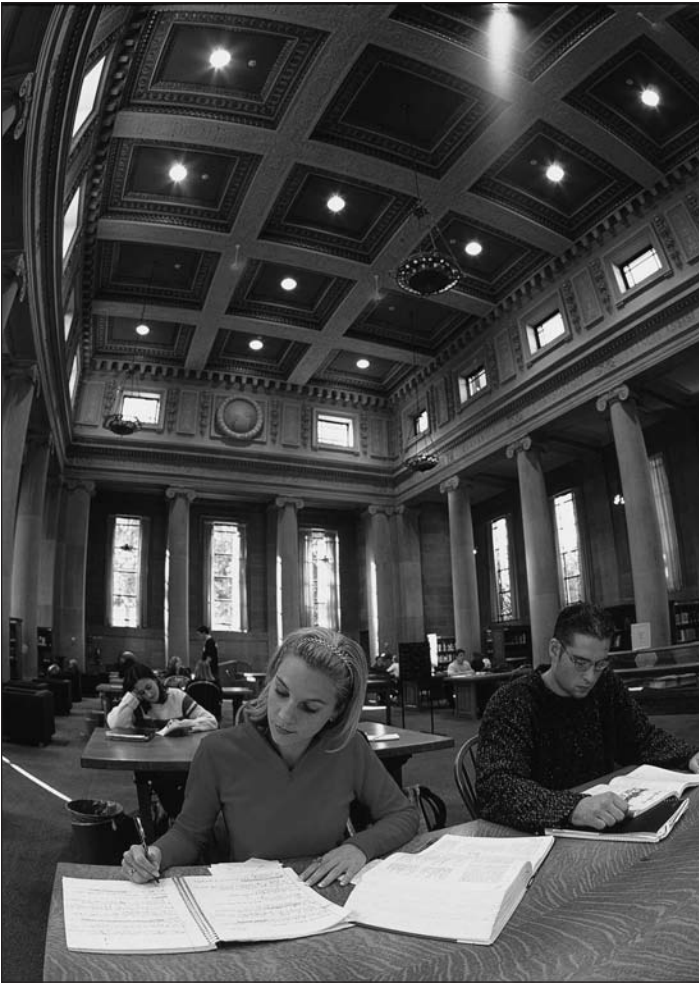
I have had the good fortune of studying and working at a number of great institutions that have a significant impact nationally and even globally, and have worked with colleagues at several others. Especially influential was my time at Bell Laboratories in its heyday, when it had some of the best minds in the world, and produced a long line of dazzling innovations that significantly changed the way we live. From those experiences I have learned something about what it takes to build a premier academic institution. In this article I will

discuss five elements that I believe are essential for achieving the academic excellence that all of our colleges and universities must strive for if we are to be faithful to our missions.

The first is talent. Great organizations build around great people, those who have the ability, commitment and drive to carry the organization to the highest possible level. That is especially true in higher education, where the work is so personal and specialized. At the center of this is the faculty, who have primary responsibility not only for the classroom experience and student learning, but also for research, innovation, curriculum development and the overall intellectual life of the institution. Moreover, it is through the faculty that the institution has its greatest impact on the wider society. In recruiting faculty, therefore, our institutions must look for candidates that have the interest and ability to

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become outstanding teachers, first of all. In addition, they should have the quality of mind, intellectual engagement, preparation and passion to pursue serious intellectual or artistic work and make substantial contributions to their fields. They should come from programs where they have been held to high standards, so that they have a sense of what it takes to achieve excellence, both for themselves and for their students. They should also have the understanding and commitment needed to be part of a community of shared values and mutual support. When the intellectual life is the foundation of an



College of the Holy Cross.

institution's mission, as it is with our colleges and universities, "hiring for mission" has to start with candidates' potential to contribute to that life.

It is also necessary to create the conditions under which the talent can flourish. That requires above all maintaining high expectations. People tend to perform up – or down – to expectations. We see that in our students; and it is true for us as well. A high performing organization must set high standards for its members. For faculty that starts with true excellence in teaching, which includes presenting difficult material in a clear and understandable manner; stimulating students' interest, curiosity and engagement; pushing students to achieve at a high level; providing timely and helpful feedback; overseeing independent work; and staying on the leading edge of the discipline. There should also be continued growth and innovation in pedagogy, new courses and expertise. Moreover, a faculty member should be expected to be a productive scholar, artist or professional. This is important in any academic institution, though the extent and level may be different, depending on the specific character and mission of the school. This type of professional development not only enhances the institution's reputa-

tion and influence, but also ensures that the faculty member will remain intellectually alive and current in the discipline and will have more to offer students both in the classroom and in student research, internships and other individualized work. The teacher who is engaged in serious intellectual pursuits brings an energy and freshness to the classroom that deepens and enriches the student experience. Finally, faculty members need to take on their share of the advising, committee work and other service that are such an important part of the community's life. These activities may not be glamorous or satisfying, but they are necessary for any institution to function well, and should be shared equitably.

Expectations are not effective unless there is accountability. There must be ways of measuring performance and its effectiveness and providing good feedback. That feedback is an essential part of learning; and we should all be learning organizations. That is how one gets better and avoids mediocrity and stagnation. Recognizing positive accomplishments and contributions is every bit as important as an incentive as identifying areas that need improvement. At Holy Cross administrators are evaluated annually through a system that compares numerous metrics related to the performance of their divisions to goals set at the beginning of the year. They also receive periodic feedback on their effectiveness as leaders from surveys of their supervisors, peers, subordinates and other colleagues.

Faculty need regular evaluation and feedback also, and not just before promotion and tenure decisions. That should begin with the effectiveness of their teaching, their most important function. One part of that is their classroom performance, based on student evaluations, teaching materials and other evidence. It should also include measures of collective effectiveness at the department, program and general education levels, through the assessment of student learning outcomes, which is increasingly being seen as an essential component of quality in higher education. Scholarship and other professional development should be evaluated in terms of the usual disciplinary standards for publication, peer review, grants and similar measures. That is the best guarantee of depth and quality. Service, leadership and other contributions to the department, institution and wider community should also be factored in.

It is just as important that faculty and others be provided with the environment they need to meet high expectations. That includes several important

dimensions. Facilities are a very visible one. Space matters. It can limit what we can achieve in classrooms, laboratories, studios and other work spaces; or it can open up many exciting new possibilities. It influences the way we interact and even how we feel about ourselves, one another and our institutions. The quality of our facilities and how well they are maintained also sends a strong message about our institutional commitment to excellence. In addition, there are many other ways in which our investment in the academic enterprise affects its quality, including libraries, support staff, start-up funds, research grants, equipment and travel.

Just as important are the many intangible elements that help shape the environment. These include a sense of collegiality, both within departments and across the institution, and a creative, stimulating intellectual atmosphere, where bright, productive scholars from both inside and outside the institution are brought together to share their ideas, insights and work. We have found that these factors can be just as important in attracting and retaining the best faculty as the more tangible ones, such as salary, workload and institutional standing. Admittedly, many of our institutions have very limited resources; and none of us is so wealthy that we can do everything we would like. We all have to make difficult tradeoffs among student needs and wants, athletics, marketing political interests and so on. Nevertheless, in these as in all the decisions we make, our mission requires that those elements that enhance academic quality be given a high priority.

**T**he fifth element I will discuss here, openness, is especially important in creating an environment in which academic excellence can flourish. Everyone must have the freedom to ask hard questions, challenge accepted “truths,” and think about issues in unconventional ways. That is how new ideas and deeper understanding emerge. At Bell Labs I often heard the saying, “You don’t invent the transistor by trying to improve the vacuum tube.” Significant breakthroughs require new approaches. That kind of freedom can seem threatening, especially when it leads to conflict with established norms, whether they are scientific, social, political, moral or religious. However, we have to trust the process and the ability, good will and integrity of the people involved. Rigorous academic inquiry and peer review are generally self-correcting and lead to fuller understanding, thus bringing us closer to some

aspect of the truth. As Thomas Aquinas often reminded us, God is Truth, so the search for truth is ultimately a search for God, an important dimension of “finding God in all things,” which is at the heart of Jesuit spirituality.

To be true to our Jesuit heritage, we should be known for our relentless, uncompromising drive for excellence. I came across one especially compelling example of this in the life of Dr. Mortimer Buckley, a Holy Cross graduate who became the head of cardiac surgery at Massachusetts General Hospital and a professor at Harvard Medical School. Dr. Buckley was an outstanding and innovative surgeon who counted many famous people among his patients.

### *Relentless, uncompromising drive*

He was best known, however, for having produced some of the finest cardiac surgeons in the world today. Upon his death in October 2008, The Harvard Gazette wrote the following:

Professionally Mortimer Buckley combined raw intelligence, a prodigious memory, great technical facility, tenacity in the care of patients, an unbelievable work ethic, and absolute dedication to teaching with an inability to accept anything less than the complete commitment of his residents to learning and the total dedication of the staff to the welfare of the patients.... While Mort could make accommodations for lesser degrees of intelligence or native surgical skills, he accepted nothing less than a resident’s absolute best efforts to try to be perfect – no cutting corners, no half-hearted attempts, only total involvement.... As his residents quickly learned, Dr. Buckley was an intense competitor. In cardiac surgery he had to be; his opponent was death. In the care of patients Mortimer Buckley only played to win.

While our work may not have the life-or-death drama of cardiac surgery, we must realize nonetheless that the stakes are high. We are instruments of God’s saving, healing work in the world. That should give us a strong sense of urgency, with “no cutting corners, no half-hearted attempts, only total involvement.” We too must only play to win. ■

*Michael McFarland, S.J., is president of the College of the Holy Cross.*