

THE UNIQUENESS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF DALLAS

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There is a sense in which all Board Members must think of the institution for which they carry responsibility as unique...unique in being their responsibility. In all candor, it is not likely that any one educational institution is alone in its essence, the first of its species, say, although logic compels us to admit such initial situations have occurred; still, the historic tracing is one of evolving, of critique and enhancement. For the most part, any new founding is likely to be an imitation of an existing model, and so it was for the University of Dallas. The Sisters of St. Mary of Namur, who started this school, took the catalog of The Catholic University of America in Washington D.C. as a guide for a basic curriculum; they could have done worse. As a matter of fact, they promptly did so; the first President added low level practical courses in home economics, shorthand, and bookkeeping in the interest of marketability, and the school was off on a road to disaster. But there were some salvific influences from the beginning; the Dean had a Notre Dame background. the Cistercians who quickly gathered here introduced rigor if not originality and established some demanding levels of performance. The interim president (Mike Duzy) who took over for the third year cancelled the order for cook stoves, distributed the manual typewriters out to various departments, and stored the drafting tables. The way had turned upward.

Louise and I joined the University in the summer between the third and fourth year. I was still in the caste of the imitators: My reform was to choose better models; I changed the textbooks in Physics to those used at MIT and Cal Tech. Louise was bolder; she did away with textbooks altogether, choosing instead paperback issues of individual works. Textbooks and anthologies, she maintained, speak of standardization, of ready-made opinions and correct answers, not of the capacious bag of shifting ambiguities that make of literature a simulation of life already shaped into significance--a resource and a stimulant for learning. In an equivalent response, the general undergraduate program began to shift away from an emphasis on skills and rote information toward learning through understanding and imagination.*****

The University of Dallas at its founding had taken a sub-title: A Catholic University for Students of All Faiths. A second sub title was added at the time of seeking its initial accreditation:"A Center of Learning." Both of these ancillary soubriquets make important commitments: the first, to a depth of spiritual concern and a breadth to its inclusiveness: the second to the persistent pursuit of learning by every one associated with the University, students and faculty alike. Students under this assumption are apprentices in the learning discipline, not products of a process. Each discipline the University recognizes has its own bag of resources out of which the professors constantly recreate their disciplines. It is this ever freshness, ever newness of learning at UD that characterized undergraduate work--and graduate work when it was introduced (about the tenth year, when the Blakely-Braniff gift was made. The statement was openly made that we establish a graduate program in a discipline in order to reform it. Accordingly, professors had to discover in themselves authority in a discipline sufficient to reform it, not merely to pass on the practice of a specialty. Brute Scholarship, the long standing academic totem, under this scheme of things, is not the acme of a profession but is in service to interpretation and originality: that is to say to learning as the central action of a discipline, its right order. This ordering is radical in its root sense and does justify the appellation "unique." Although individual departments elsewhere, particularly in the sciences, may practice such prioritization, to have it a matter of general policy was unheard of. Not all professors went along with

the statement, at least consciously; not only were there vested interests to protect but there were pieties to be observed. Yet all were affected.

The doctoral programs began, then, with brightness and a notable amount of brashness. Wilmore Kendall, the real instigator of the graduate program and, with Louise, its designer, died suddenly the summer after its first year. It was a bold act to go on without him, but with the generous help of several of the top political philosophers in the country--Voegelin, Martin Diamond, Harry Jaffa, George Anastoplo, George Carey, and others--we made it through a transitional few years to a standing on our own feet with our own faculty.

The brashness did not go unnoticed. The accrediting body, the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges, responding to complaints made to it by anonymous professors, sent a two man team to investigate. The choices for the team were remarkably fortunate; the Chancellor of the Louisiana State University System and a very wise Professor of History from North Carolina. These two quite learned men spent four days on campus, interviewing students and faculty, checking facilities and finances. At the end, they asked that Louise and I meet with them. When we entered the room, we noticed a bottle of champagne on the table; they got to their feet and raised their glasses to us--a generous tribute of reassurance. They admitted that when they began the interviews, they were much amused at the recurrences of the word "wisdom" the students used to state the aims of the program. "We're not laughing now," one of them said; "It really is your goal." Of course they called the library inadequate and the spectrum of studies too small (with only two disciplines represented) but they gave the program not only approval; they gave it admiration.

In response to the comment on breadth of the program, the graduate faculty widened its scope from the single program in Politics and Literature to four interacting programs in Psychology, Philosophy, Politics, and Literature, organized as an Institute of Philosophic Studies. (The Department of Theology declined to join.) The top professors from four departments along with distinguished visitors made up an impressive faculty. The program had a hundred full-time graduate students at the time it was set aside; it had been called a model for graduate work at liberal arts institutions and an affordable way for a small university to offer a legitimate doctoral degree.

This little history is set forth not to assign credit or seek praise but to point out some difficulties a Board faces in evaluating the performance of an institution under its aegis. The uniqueness of a particular institution must be recognized and allowed to temper critical opinions garnered from more conventional sources, experts though they may appear to be.

What are Trustees? What do they hold in trust and for whom do they hold it? In a legal sense, trustees represent the general public. Educational institutions are granted charters by the state that specify certain purposes in the interest of society and convey certain privileges to facilitate these ends. In a narrower sense and secondary to the general purposes, a board may represent some special interests of founders or sustainers but if these interests become too narrowly controlled, the courts can dismiss the board and reconstitute it more in the public interests. Vanderbilt was removed from control of the Methodist Church and made independent under just such circumstances. Some Catholic institutions have set up

baroque arrangements of hierarchical boards with the effective board of broad representation actually subject to actions of a small body--six or so--members of the founding order. Notre Dame has such an arrangement (or did). When I asked one of the top administrators, a member of the order, what would happen if the small group tried to take over, he answered, "I think we can beat them," clearly lining up with the college over the order.

As for UD. the Trustees do not own the institution; nor does the Diocese. It belongs to itself. The Board of Trustees can hire and fire the President, must approve the budget since it is responsible fiscally, can dispose of real property, but its actions are challengeable by any interested party acting in the public interest. (An "interest" can be a history of appreciable financial support over an extended period. But other less tangible "interests" may serve.) It might be said that what the Trustees hold in Trust is an ever-developing tradition, subject to corrections and minor deviations but to major changes of direction only under extreme and thoroughly investigated circumstances. Tradition takes into account not only finances but intellectual and social investments of long services; it accumulates the past. It is important for Trustees to understand these elements and to shape their proposed innovations and improvements in consonance with a thorough comprehension of the purposes of the institution and respect for its tradition.

A depth of understanding and of commitment on the part of Board members is the greatest asset a University can have; no president can operate effectively without it.

Actually the Board has great powers and much latitude. The University of Dallas Board from its beginning has had an impressive array of top executives and professional persons over a spectrum of interests--the local newspaper once characterized it as a "Who's Who" of Dallas Leaders. Its members are persons of vision and judgement. But Boards, too, must have new starts. They cannot simply continue in the same direction. New perspectives, new angles of vision are needed from which to view the original mission. And new bursts of energy--new endowments of love and commitment--are required if the university is to continue in its movement toward the supernal achievement to which it was called.