Remarks at the President's Leadership Development Retreat

September 9, 2011

First of all, thanks to Abbie and to President Burcham – I hope I got those in the right order – for the invitation to address this group. What’s happening here today is important, and I’m grateful to be asked to be a part of it. I understand the focus today is going to be on the forthcoming Strategic Plan. I myself don’t have a formal role in that process; I’m not on the Steering Committee, and so all I know is just what I read in the white papers, or what I’ve been able to get the Committee members to leak to me. But I gather my role today is to say something on behalf of the faculty, which I love to do: so let me begin by thanking you, on behalf of the faculty, for all you have done and all you are getting ready to do to bring this strategic planning process to fruition.

Strategic planning, as I understand it, is about arresting drift and replacing it with decision and direction. Our university, notwithstanding all the progress we have made in many respects over the past decade or two, has unfortunately also seen too much drifting over that same period. Some of that drift has been blown by the winds of nation-wide trends – tuition inflation, grade inflation, lower academic expectations of students, increasing reliance on term and adjunct faculty, student financial challenges. Some of the drift has been more institution-specific – for instance, an unclear definition of our research-teaching balance, requirement-heavy academic programs, a less academically prepared admissions pool than our comparator schools, challenges of shared governance arising from our rapid decentralization of authority to the Colleges and Schools, challenges to community posed by our geographic branching out to the lower campus location.

There is I think widespread agreement that these are some of the major challenges we face in the academic arena in the coming years. And in addition to this agreement about challenges, I think there is also widespread (though not universal) agreement about several of the main themes that our Strategic Plan needs to address. I think almost everyone agrees the Strategic Plan ought to say clearly and specifically that we need to expect more from our students, and do more to give them a challenging, rigorous, and focused academic experience. I think almost everyone believes the Strategic Plan should recognize the need to foster and enhance meaningful experiences of intellectual community among and between LMU faculty, staff, and students, as well as the need to make the faith and justice oriented aspects of our identity and mission an even more central and distinctive aspect of what defines an LMU education. Those are all goals that, depending of course on how we articulate them, I believe a wide majority of LMU faculty, staff, and administrative leaders would be eager to get behind.
So I don’t think there’s really all that much difference between us on the basic challenges we face; and I suspect that, in broad strokes, there is also a pretty wide consensus on what kinds of things we need to do to meet those challenges – though the devil, as always, is in the details. But I think there is a deeper level of uncertainty surrounding this process, one that’s not based on disagreement so much as on doubt. The question I think most of our campus leaders, our most invested community members, have about the strategic planning process is not, what are our challenges? or even, what should we do about them? It is instead: is this going to be for real? And I bet you every member of the Steering Committee has heard that question, and I know Dave and Joe must have heard it a bunch. Is this strategic plan really going to make a difference? After the President has approved it and the Trustees have voted on it, is the strategic plan then going to become the guiding star we steer our course by? Or is it instead going to get stuck in a drawer, while we keep drifting along?

I know Dave and Joe are absolutely committed to delivering on one answer to that question, and I think most people in this room really want them to deliver on it. But the truth is that the answer to that vital question – guiding star, or stuck in a drawer – doesn’t lie within the power of any single individual or any single group. It depends instead on two choices that still lie ahead of us, one that has yet to be made by the Steering Committee, and another that has yet to be made by the rest of the people in this room. And LMU’s immediate future, whether it drifts along, or takes a new direction, really rests on the outcome of those two choices.

The choice facing the Steering Committee is this: Just how bold are we going to be? In some ways, of course, that decision formally belongs to Dave and to the Trustees, and I’m convinced they will be ready to support a truly bold plan if the Steering Committee gives them one. By the same token, however, it will be next to impossible for them to accomplish something truly bold unless the Steering Committee challenges them to do it, and offers them a daring blueprint for what LMU can become in the years ahead. You all know the logic of what a bold plan can do as well as I do. JFK liked to tell the story of the Irish boys who tossed their caps over a wall that seemed too high for them to climb so they would be committed to tackling it come what may, a story Kennedy used as a metaphor for his own commitment of America’s resources to the seemingly impossible goal of reaching the moon. We need the Steering Committee to offer us something bold and daring that will capture the LMU community’s imagination, because that in itself will provide our first earnest that this strategic plan is going to be for real. We need them to go straight for the jugular of the challenges we face – strengthening academic rigor and expectations for students, better defining and supporting the teacher-scholar role for faculty, enriching and deepening the reality of LMU as first and foremost a community of the mind, and more completely integrating that identity as a place of authentic academic excellence with the other, more distinctive aspects of our Jesuit-Marymount identity. We need to confront those challenges not with half measures but rather the sort of dramatic choice characteristic of a community fully determined to seize its destiny and replace drift with decision and direction.
And so our first test is going to be that choice by the Steering Committee – just how bold are we going to be? – about which we will get our first feedback very soon.

That first choice is closely related to the second one, the one faced collectively by all the people in this room – and that second choice is, I think, at the very heart of what today’s leadership retreat about strategic planning is really about. And that choice is this: how far are we – the people in this room – willing to trust one another? Because if any of the bold changes we’re hoping for are really going to happen, it is going to be because faculty, staff, and administrative leaders – the people in this room – succeed in trusting one another. That’s not something we’ve been all that good at lately, for reasons passing understanding. In fact, I don’t know of any institution where there has been a greater disconnect between the frequency with which we run into trouble based on mistrust, on the one hand, and the actual good faith and good will of the individuals involved, on the other. We at LMU deserve to trust one another. We deserve to have a community that is able to achieve the kinds of things that become achievable when a community’s leaders trust one another. Dave and Joe understand this, and they are not naïve about it. They know trust is something that has to be earned, and I believe they’re willing to work to earn it every day. And I can tell you the faculty were enormously encouraged by Dave’s decision to appoint faculty members as such a sizable proportion of the Steering Committee and the Summer Working Groups; and, in my view, the way Joe and the Committee have handled the issues of consultation, transparency, and accountability so far have been a model of how shared governance is supposed to work. So thank you for that, sincerely. But it takes more than just one or two people, or even a terrific Steering Committee, to build the kind of trust we need. Above all, it takes leaders – lots of leaders. All the leaders in this room are not too many for the task ahead of us, the task of rebuilding trust at LMU, which I believe is the crucial unknown variable that is going to determine whether this strategic plan will succeed.

To rebuild trust at LMU, we need your help. We need you because we need what you represent – your communities, the various limbs and organs that make up the body politic we call LMU. Everyone in this room has experience already as a leader – and so to everyone in this room it will be not a novel insight, but rather a familiar truth, that leadership is not ultimately about leaders at all. Leadership is instead about the communities that leaders lead. No leader finds satisfaction in her own virtues of leadership; she finds satisfaction in results, measured by how well she is able to translate what inspires her into something that inspires a community, not because she keeps saying it, but because the community itself comes to believe it. Successful leaders make promises that the communities they lead come to see as their own.

A Strategic Plan is, in its essence, that sort of promise. It is a commitment that Dave, and the Steering Committee, and the Trustees, and the Cabinet, and the rest of the administrative and faculty leadership, make to the larger university community about where we are headed, about what our priorities are going to be, about what sacrifices we are willing to make, about what values we are willing to stretch to our very limits to live up to. It is the responsibility of Dave and Joe and the Steering Committee to make sure the Strategic Plan really is the sort of bold
promise that can inspire and speak for the whole community and its commitment to the institutional mission. But then it is up to the rest of us in this room, as leaders, to transpose that abstract promise into concrete reality, to be the nervous system that signals to the larger community that the promise is for real, and that then animates the body politic to step out on faith and tackle challenges together that none of us would dare to attempt on our own.

One of the largely unexpected perks of this job I’ve got this year of Faculty Senate President is that all year long I get to go places and say things like, “On behalf of the Faculty of Loyola Marymount University …” and then kind of say whatever I want, because who’s going to call me on it? It is in that spirit that I would like to take this opportunity to say first to the Steering Committee, on behalf of the Faculty of Loyola Marymount University, I ask you – to go long; to pull the trigger on a plan that is bold and innovative and speaks directly to the heart of the challenges we face as an institution; to toss our caps over the wall for us and so convince the LMU community that this is going to be for real, that the leadership at LMU truly is committed to replacing drift with decision and direction in the years ahead. And then, to the rest of the people in this room, on behalf of the Faculty of Loyola Marymount University, I ask you to trust one another; to ask yourselves, just how far can I stretch to help inspire and bring along my department, my program, my division, my College or School, to lead LMU to a destination we can only reach if we trust one another and listen and compromise and work together, a destination we could never reach on our own; and then to strike out in that direction, and bring your folks along with you; and when you all get there, I promise, you are going to find that Dave and Joe and the Steering Committee and the Trustees and, if I have anything to say about it, the Faculty Senate, are all going to be there waiting for you, ready to roll up our sleeves and get to work. If, right now, we do that, if at this critical moment we trust one another, we are going to find one another trustworthy; and finding one another trustworthy, we are going to do great things together. Thank you.