Remarks at the Second Annual President’s Leadership Development Retreat

September 21, 2012

Thanks very much to Abbie and to President Burcham for the invitation to speak at the opening of this year’s President’s Leadership Development Retreat, from a faculty perspective, on the subject of “Transformational Change.” Let me begin by directly addressing your skepticism. Yes, that term “transformational change” already has us skating very close to the edge of cliché. Knowing what we know, having been where we’ve been, our instinct as faculty, staff and administrators is to discount anything that comes wrapped in the label “transformational” as invoking just another LMU buzzword-du-jour – pervasive (because it can be used to justify almost anything) but presumptively meaningless. Your skepticism of that sort of “transformational change” is entirely reasonable.

It didn’t have to be that way. The word at the heart of “transformative” is “formative,” and that word should have a special resonance in a Jesuit-inspired university. Ignatian spirituality and Ignatian pedagogy share at their heart a common commitment to “formation,” the idea that the goal of education and indeed of life itself is not merely to acquire – facts, skills, career prospects – but rather to grow. Education, the Jesuits believed, could lead us to become someone different, someone whose self is secretly crafted and then propelled into action by the consuming, creative love that animates the whole universe and that the broken world around us desperately needs. Education is about change – far-reaching, deep-searching, radical change of the individual’s mind and heart, prompting equally radical change of our social structures. That idea is in our very bones: it was our true foundation centuries before the cornerstones of Xavier and St. Rob’s were ever quarried; and if we have grown too cynical to take it seriously, we may as well pack it in.

So it bears some reflection: is there an account of “transformative education” we can still believe in enough to invest our lives and our vocations in pursuing? If there is, I think we will have to begin our search by thinking about what we believe needs to be transformed, and how. It means we need to begin with our students. Because the answer to the question “how do we effect transformational change at LMU?” depends directly on our answer to the prior question “what do we want to transform our students to become?” That requires careful thought – and with all due respect to our students, we can’t simply ask them. Their most vivid association with the term “transform” is a franchise of films in which “transforming” refers to robots that turn into cars, and the transformational narrative arc taken by the main characters in those films, Shia LaBoeef and Megan Fox, two ordinary, exceptionally hot people whose journey of discovery transforms them into two heroic, exceptionally hot people committed to fighting for truth and justice alongside robots that turn into cars.

That’s an isolated and not even particularly egregious example of what we are up against, which Father Adolfo Nicolas captured in the wonderful phrase, “the globalization of superficiality.”
Superficiality, of course, has been the enemy of educators for millennia – just as it has also been our most dangerous temptation. But the idea that superficiality is now becoming globalized – that its reach has been extended exponentially in recent decades by the explosive impact of the microchip and the global marketplace, gradually sucking us into the swirling, frenetic, headlong, reflection-eliding, context-destroying, subtlety-denying, value-relativizing, lightning-velocity aimless drift of contemporary life – is an insight I think we have to begin by taking very seriously.

The good news is this. If the globalization of superficiality is the disease, then the mission we profess to follow – the encouragement of learning, the education of the whole person, the service of faith and the promotion of justice – is, if we deliver on it, the only plausible cure. How can we respond to this culture-wide acceleration of the shallowness of mind and soul we have always known as humans but that now threatens to spiral out of control? Simple. We form inspired, focused, dedicated, lifelong learners. We form educated whole people, whose hearts and brains are connected by more than just nerves and arteries. We form men and women who exist and act for others, not just for themselves.

If we help to form such people, then we at LMU truly have something special to offer the world around us. If – and I stress the if – if we truly offer that sort of transformation to our students, then we have the advantage and the gratification of knowing that anyone who walks through our gates, just by virtue of being human, is someone who needs what we are offering; and if so we have the obligation, as President Burcham has said from the very beginning, to ensure that everyone who needs what we are offering is able to walk through our gates. (I’m told they can drive through them for an additional $670).

But do we form such people? Are we really doing that now? That’s a question that each academic department and administrative unit, each member of our faculty and staff will have to search out the truth of and answer for themselves. But to the extent we are not – and some of the evidence about our students’ study habits and learning outcomes strongly suggests we are not yet doing nearly enough in the area of academic rigor – we won’t be able to transform our students the way we want, we will be fighting uphill all the way, until we also transform our educational practices.

From a faculty perspective, we already know what many of the practices are that might really make a difference to our students’ education. We know our students need to read more, and read more carefully, and be held accountable for doing the reading. We know they need to write more, especially multi-draft writing. We know they need information literacy and independent research skills; we know they need quantitative reasoning skills and exposure to complex disciplinary methodologies; we know they need more individual mentoring, and more engaged learning. We know they need higher expectations. We already know this is what our students need. We just require the will to make it happen.
But universities are funny places, and one of their strangest features is the difficulty they encounter in attempting to change established practices, even when it would promote broadly supported goals. We faculty members bear a lot of responsibility for that: admittedly no job lends itself to getting set in your ways more easily than being a faculty member. And so we find again and again that the gravitational pull of the status quo, stronger within the university than in perhaps any other planetary system, poses a formidable obstacle to transforming our practices.

That’s where our strategic plan is supposed to come in: it’s meant to provide a road map for transforming our practices that will enable us to better transform our students. When I spoke here a year ago, I stressed the need for us to be bold in what we reached for as we developed our plan. (Sorry, these signs just register each time I say the word “bold,” as a courtesy to those who are playing a drinking game in the back row). Looking back, I think I assumed that the question of how bold we would be would inevitably wind up getting resolved, one way or another, over the course of the coming year: we would succeed or fail depending on how much gumption and nerve we showed in the plan we adopted. Instead, I now recognize that the degree of potential boldness the strategic plan represents is still very much up for grabs. The plan opens the door for us to address aggressively every major strategic challenge we face over the next decade, if we are creative and nimble and determined. But it’s nothing like an idiot-proof blueprint that guarantees we’ll meet those challenges in a sufficiently forceful way. I understand now that the strategic plan is instead at best an invitation: the first measure in a long and complicated minuet of discernment and invention and iron resolution that we will have to repeat over and over again in the days to come if we want to meaningfully transform our practices.

And that’s why we need you: our faculty, staff, and administrative leaders. The very fact that you are in this room means you’ve earned the trust and respect of your colleagues; it means people listen to you. And if we’re going to make this strategic plan an instrument for genuine change, we’re going to need you to bring all the leadership you possess to insist we take advantage of this moment of rare focus and openness to systematically reinvent what we do. If you have a dean, we need you to hound that dean; if you have a strategic planning committee, we need you to bug and annoy the members of that committee; if you report to a senior vice president, we need to you to respectfully and with an enormous degree of deference remind that senior vice president what this is all about. It’s about innovating; it’s about thinking creatively; it’s about disrupting our current settled practices and giving them a searching, critical examination; it’s about reaching high.

Not everyone has to do the same thing, but everyone needs to reach high. A lot was made in the plan of the idea of 4-unit courses as a possible instrument for boldly addressing academic rigor. In the ensuing conversation we learned a lot, and I think we now agree, not everyone has to go to 4-unit courses to address academic rigor, not everyone should. But let’s make sure every college and school, every department and program tries to do something comparably innovative, something genuinely challenging, to really get our hands around the goal
of enhancing academic rigor and focus in a meaningful way. Let’s be disappointed with ourselves if we don’t do that. Because the one thing we know beyond any real doubt is that right now what we’re doing as a university in terms of academic rigor – it isn’t enough. It just isn’t enough yet. And fixing that is going to take the very best from all of us.

What it really comes down to is this. If we want LMU to offer a genuinely transformative educational experience for our students, we’re only going to make that real, especially given our current resource constraints, if we’re willing to put on the table the kind of far-reaching changes that will inevitably disrupt our own familiar and comfortable ways of doing things. And to do that we’re going to have to undertake something even harder: transforming our community, and transforming ourselves.

When I spoke here a year ago I predicted that the success of the strategic plan would depend, in the final analysis, on how far we, the people in this room, were willing to trust one another. So how did we do on that? I think the best answer we can give is that the jury’s still out. Admittedly, we’ve had some tension the last few years, with the new core and rank and tenure: from the perspective of campus climate, it hasn’t always been our warmest, fuzziest moment. But I think if we look deeper, there are real grounds for optimism. In both those cases, after much anguish and many false starts, we defined a decision-making process; consulted widely with relevant stakeholders; confronted our differences head on; yet remained committed to finding a solution acceptable to those most invested in the outcome. And in the end we achieved an agreement on those issues that the full faculty confirmed by a vote of 75% or greater – a consensus we could hardly have imagined when we started. Have we had some tense moments along the way? Sure. But I challenge you to find another university that has in back-to-back years gone after the two things faculty care most about – the curriculum we share in common, and the standards that define our role as teachers and scholars – and has wound up arriving at policies affirmed in both cases by greater than three-quarters of the voting faculty.

It wasn’t always pretty, it wasn’t the easiest or the most direct path to our destination, but I think events have shown that what resulted really did constitute something like the common good for our university as a whole. And in my view that’s the key to transformational and lasting change, as corny as it may sound: authentically seeking the common good. Aristotle taught that in the corrupt form of popular government, the majority rules merely in its own interest (he called that “democracy”); whereas in the true form of popular government, the majority rules instead in the interest of the whole community. That’s why I’m now a true believer, with all the zeal of the convert, in the importance of the 75% solution – the kind that the whole university can view, not perhaps as the perfect expression of any individual’s preferences, but rather as a good we hold in common, a shared purpose that helps define who we are and that binds us together as a community.

But if we are going to embrace the common good, we are necessarily going to have to loosen our grip a little on our own individual good. And that’s what I mean when I say that if we want to
transform our community, we’re also going to have to transform ourselves. Each of us brings our own challenges to that task. For example: sometimes I have a tendency to be impatient when change is slow. But sometimes what the people around me need, what LMU needs from me, is for me to be a little more patient. Other times I like to be in control, to have everything clearly defined, and sometimes that tempts me to try to steer things too much. But sometimes what LMU needs from me is to loosen my grip and let things go where the collective wisdom of my colleagues wants to lead us. And you know I like to hear myself talk – when sometimes what LMU needs is for me to shut up and listen to what other people are trying to tell me. And those are just my vices; possibly you have others, and if so you can add them to the list.

It’s potentially a lot for us to overcome; heck, just my vices are a lot for us to overcome. And that brings me back to where I started: to education as formation. In the Ignatian context, formation is always also transformation: from the old man to the new, from the fallen Adam to the risen Christ; each individual and also the community as a whole seeking to conform themselves to a shared pattern of patient, humble, selfless, sacrificial love, with all their being and with all their heart. But in case that sounds like a bit much for those of us in this room, here’s a simpler version. Education is formation, wherever you find it: education is transformation. Change is not only possible, we are in the change business. We can grow, as individuals and as a community. We can learn from our mistakes. We can learn what one another have to teach. If we commit ourselves now to boldly pursuing together that common good for LMU; if we bring to the endeavor our patience, our humility, our mutual respect; if we are willing to rethink, to compromise, maybe even to sacrifice; if we are willing to learn, and willing to grow; then we have a once in a generation opportunity to truly transform this place and all who come here to learn. I hope we will take it: dreaming big, working hard, trusting one another – and if we do, we are going to do great things together. Thanks.