

Duke and the Changing Landscape: A Planning Prologue

Five years ago, in February 2001, Duke University issued a strategic plan entitled *Building on Excellence*. Five years later, this university can look back with satisfaction – and even inspiration – at what it accomplished with that plan’s direction. Candidly assessing Duke’s current state in face of the array of challenges all universities would encounter, that document proposed a set of overarching goals to govern this school’s institutional choices. At the same time that it set these ambitions, Duke also embraced the discipline of designating significant resource streams that would be available only for strategic projects.

Thanks to this combination of ends and means, Duke University as a whole and each of its component parts have become significantly stronger over the past five years. New buildings have created the spaces for pioneering research activities: having embraced the goal of strengthening science and engineering, for instance, Duke opened the Fitzpatrick Center in 2005, and the French Family Science Center is now nearing completion. The difference these splendid facilities make for recruiting top faculty and students is already apparent. New programmatic strengths have arisen together with new buildings. Guided by the commitment to extend our global reach and influence, Duke has become a leader in internationalization, exceeding all American universities in federal support for international area studies and engaging unusually large numbers of students in study abroad. Under the influence of *Building on Excellence*, our core infrastructure has been radically strengthened as well. Duke has changed from a follower to a leader in the use of information technology, and the university’s central academic resource, its library, is being renovated with dramatic results. Since the Bostock Library opened in October 2005, library use has increased by an astonishing 40%.

One less obvious achievement needs noting as well. *Building on Excellence* was a university plan in the sense that its goals were not particular to any individual school but relevant to them all. In addition to their own local strategic priorities, Duke’s various undergraduate, graduate, and professional schools were asked to embrace these shared values and decide how to pursue them to advantage on their own terms. In consequence of this approach, as each unit has become individually stronger, Duke’s component parts have knit themselves together far more closely over the past five years, by working toward common goals. The sense of common purpose and the habits of university-wide collaboration created through *Building on Excellence* are among the most remarkable of its accomplishments.

In many universities, “strategic planning” is an unromantic prospect, a bureaucratic exercise doomed to produce recommendations that will gather dust while the status quo moves forward more or less unobstructed. At Duke, strategic planning is exciting to undertake because it actually makes a difference: it produces visible transformation in the university’s capacities and direction. Having realized many of the ambitions hatched in the last planning period, the time arrives for Duke University to plan the next phase of its evolution. So the question arises, if we really are capable of making a difference, what are the most valuable differences we could seek to make?

Upon arriving at this point, it might seem that the next move is to begin drawing up a wish list of things Duke would like to have and do. But the university will need to make choices among our desires, and to make the choices that will do the most good, we need to think about what fundamentally matters. The last planning document defined the ambition “to be among the small number of institutions that define what is best in American higher education.” That is still the right level for our aspiration; but what is a university at its best? A great university is a great gathering of intelligence: a place where issues of deep human consequence are addressed with profundity and creativity, and where every question interesting to ask is being answered in interesting ways. At such a place, students are not just beneficiaries of, but also central players in this process of exploration. The poet Yeats said that education is not the filling of the bucket but the lighting of a fire. In the logic of this figure, a great university is a scene of constant combustion, a place where energies of intelligence and creativity are being continually released through the encounter of lively minds.

If this is so, the most strategic moves a university can make will be the ones that most further the goals of stimulating inquiry and enlivening education. But in our time, those processes are clearly not static. They are changing in response to a variety of new challenges and forces, and the university that will best serve these ends going forward is one that will best anticipate and accommodate these changes starting now.

To be more particular, universities as we know them are organized around a model of knowledge-production and knowledge-transmission that was consolidated in the 19th and perfected in the 20th century. This model is based on the logic of specialization, the development of powerfully disciplined expertise within tightly bounded areas of inquiry. The logic of specialization gave us not just the great intellectual breakthroughs of the last century but the academic landscape as we know it: the familiar map of academic departments, specialized graduate programs and professional schools, the undergraduate major in a single discipline, and the like. We are clearly not at the end of the day of specialization. To arrive at the point of where we can join in the creation of new knowledge, we still have to travel deep into the territory of specialized expertise. But we have come to a time when the limits of this system have become more apparent, and the need for new forms of knowledge increasingly clear.

In our world, information circulates instantaneously without restrictions of time or space, and virtually every point on the planet has been incorporated into the global networks new technologies have enabled. As economic activity, health menaces, and security threats become increasingly global in their causes and consequences, education more than ever needs to have an international horizon. But this is not the deepest educational challenge posed by a more interactive world. Through this accelerated and ever-more-inclusive process of exchange, understanding itself is continually metamorphosing, so that no single body of learning is likely to supply the enduringly adequate base for a whole career, as was imagined in the not-so-distant past.

In this new order, the complexity of problems will be increasingly apparent. We already begin to understand, for instance, that every health issue has a pathological, genetic, and

an environmental dimension, not to mention a psychological, a sociological, a legal, and a spiritual one as well; and that health care is a problem at once medical, cultural, economic, and policy-dependent in solution. In a world where challenges take this form, an educated person will need to be able to pull together and integrate disparate bodies of knowledge, and to do so not by some fixed formula teachable in advance but improvisationally, opportunistically, in response to changing arrays of facts and resources.

To develop the skills of problem-solving in many-sided and rapidly changing situations, the abstract mental exercises that have formed the staple of education as we have known it will need to be supplemented with the chance to encounter problems in their unabstracted, real-world forms, where the plurality of their dimensions and the specificity of their challenges can be fully grasped. Further, although mental independence and solitary reflection will be as important as ever, many issues will require the sharing or pooling of understanding, the bringing together of bodies of knowledge that no one person could possess alone. Working in teams will be as characteristic of the integrative regime of knowledge as working alone was of the regime of specialization; and learning how to supplement our understanding with that of others with different mental horizons will be increasingly essential.

Seen in this light, many relatively new features that have become familiar in the modern university can be understood not as the separate, add-on developments they first appear but as manifestations of new ways of using and training the mind. Interdisciplinary programs can be seen not as suburbs springing up mysteriously around the standard curriculum but as new-model learning based on the merging, not separation, of intellectual fields. The culture of diversity in universities, the promotion of inclusiveness, cooperation, and respect across boundaries of gender, ethnicity, race, religion, and national culture, originated as (and is still meaningful as) a quest for social justice. But if this value will be more, not less, important in the future, it is because it also promotes the collaboration across horizons that will be the precondition for mental breakthroughs in time to come. There is probably no single greater change in selective American universities in the last thirty years than the explosion of organized extracurricular activities. Some analysts have suggested that this extracurricular mania arises from the will to perfect in youth the overworked, hyperscheduled life-habits that will prevail in successful middle age. But this phenomenon makes a different sense if we recognize that the extra-curriculum has become a prime site for the teaching and learning of the new curriculum, the curriculum of improvisational, team-based, problem-solving education. When students make a film or plan a concert or bring engineering know-how to disaster scenes in foreign countries, they are redeploying skills they had acquired separately and for other occasions to create something none of them could have made alone.

If we are in a transition between one model of knowledge-formation and another, then we have to keep this fact centrally in mind as we plan for the university's future. Duke needs to be strong in every traditional way, but Duke will not realize its potential simply by building to a traditional model of the university. For the good of faculty and students alike, we need to build new versions of those activities based on integration,

collaboration, and reconnecting knowledge to real-world problems as we support the enduringly essential aspects of specialization-based research, teaching and learning. Duke has special advantages in meeting this challenge – not least its relatively weak addiction to the status quo. But the measures we choose for the future cannot just be good things we can do and build. Our plans will be strategic in proportion as they help us accommodate this deep change in the university’s fundamental mission.

Thanks to the work inspired by the last strategic plan, Duke enters this planning period in a significantly stronger position than it had five years ago. As noted, the distinctiveness of Duke’s institutional character also gives it many benefits in facing a challenge all of higher education will share. Duke has long attracted faculty whose interests range across narrow disciplinary boundaries. As a result, interdisciplinarity is a healthy feature of much existing intellectual life, not an imported exotic to be forced unwillingly on hostile departments or narrow minds. The walls between departments and schools are also notably weaker at Duke than at most leading research universities, and collaborations already happen freely and spontaneously across significant intellectual distances. It is a further part of Duke’s institutional culture that while pure research is pursued with great intensity and subtlety, the pursuit of knowledge tends not to stay shut in on itself. It is natural to many Duke faculty to seek to bring their knowledge to bear on real-world problems, and the institution facilitates the passage from inquiry and discovery to translation and real-world service in a number of formal ways. The Sanford Institute of Public Policy facilitates the interchange between pure research and policy application in fields like the welfare of children, global security studies, and international development. The Institute for Genome Sciences & Policy systematically connects genomic research to the devising and testing of new therapies. The Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions supplies a point of exchange between academic science and environmental policy-making in government, business, and non-governmental sectors.

The presence of such features means that Duke does not need to make a hard turn to prepare for a new organization of knowledge. Our current situation equips us with highly relevant strengths: indeed, the balancing or blending of specialization with the countervirtues of integration, collaboration, and application is already deeply rooted in our institutional character. Armed with these advantages, it is time to ask in a more comprehensive way how Duke can meet a changing landscape of knowledge and education. The current report looks across the whole university, from the sciences to the arts, and across and the whole range of the university’s activities, from faculty hiring through facilities planning to curriculum design and student life, in the light of that challenge. Working with the best in current practice, we seek to identify a family of concerted moves Duke could make to assure that faculty can seize the most important new opportunities in research and teaching and that students can emerge well prepared for the world of their time.

Like *Building on Excellence*, this is a university plan, to be pursued in conjunction with the planning each school has undertaken to meet its particular circumstances and needs. The plan is itself an example of the virtues it recommends, a collaborative labor profiting from input from deans, administrators, faculty, and students from every school. Duke

University commits itself to this plan in hopes that, under its guidance, we will gain as much ground in the next five years as we have in the five years past. We look forward to making a difference within the university so that Duke faculty, students, and alumni can be fully equipped to make a difference to the world.