



2010/2011 Series: Economic Prosperity in the Next Decade

chapter five: **Values and Vision**

Identity, Integrated Planning, and Institutional Transformation



Values and Vision

Identity, Integrated Planning, and Institutional Transformation

Dr. Thomas F. Flynn: President of Alvernia University

Institutional transformation stories abound in higher education. Dramatic change is sometimes a response to crisis or part of a turnaround strategy to establish financial equilibrium. More frequently, schools seek the ubiquitous, if ill-defined goal proclaimed by countless presidential search committees—“the next level.” (Mine did in 2005!)

Most transformations involve upgraded facilities. Many feature notable enrollment growth, and some emphasize program and campus expansion. Any genuine transformation requires leadership by and significant investment in the faculty, as well as bold risk taking by executives and trustees. All seek enhancement of the school’s visibility and reputation. And all are guided by the obligatory long-range plan, a mission statement, and some measure of “the vision thing.”

Alvernia University’s recent transformation from small college to multi-dimensional University reflects all these experiences. Yet, most important have been the renewal of our Franciscan *identity* and the intentional *integration* of often separate yet necessarily interrelated planning efforts. The choice of “Values and Vision” as the name of the resulting capital campaign offers insight into key elements of this journey.

The accompanying expansion of faculty, the judicious addition of two key facilities, and the resulting growth in institutional self-confidence made possible a reenvisioning of the future.

Historical Context

In 1997, when my predecessor assumed office, Alvernia was a still-tiny college approaching its 40th anniversary. The 1,200 students enrolled were drawn primarily from a 50- to 100-mile radius, with 900 full-time students and fewer than 300 living on campus. An evening division reflected a historic commitment to adult education. Many among the full-time faculty of 50 lacked terminal degrees, and salaries were well below average. Sponsored by the Bernardine Franciscans, the school still drew on a small but skilled group of devoted Sisters, beloved for their caring attention to students of all religious backgrounds. Alvernia was not well known even locally, though community members who knew the college considered it a place of opportunity for working adults and students of limited financial means and modest high school records. Operating finances had been stabilized, with the expert help of lay trustees from the business community. But like all schools with low enrollment, little endowment, minimal fundraising, and modest facilities, the school was in precarious shape.

Slightly more than a decade later, Alvernia has become a thriving University of 3,000 students, organized into two colleges and a School of Graduate and Continuing Studies. The University now includes almost 1,450 full-time undergraduates (800 on campus) and numerous adult students, with more than 750 in masters programs and the area's only doctoral program. Guided by the Franciscan commitment to "serve the underserved," satellite campuses offer educational opportunity to largely first-generation populations near northwest Philadelphia and in Schuylkill County, part of the coal region. The Montessori School offers preschool and early childhood education, and the Seniors College sponsors a separate curriculum of mini-courses and other programs for hundreds of retirees. More than 90 full-time faculty members, most of them hired in the past decade, form the cornerstone of both the graduate and undergraduate programs. Faculty credentials and compensation have improved considerably, and many are productive scholars and active professionally.

Few Sisters remain on the faculty and staff, but the Congregation has emerged as an indispensable partner. The Sisters make available a large chapel and beautiful conference center, and have approved a generous land-use agreement to enable the University to complete a new campus entrance, accessed by a spectacular approach road that winds through a picturesque park. Strategic property purchases and an aggressive building program, guided by a master plan, have in a short time more than doubled campus acreage and expanded academic, residential, and recreational facilities. An unprecedented fundraising effort, despite being announced just as the economy worsened, has at its half-way point exceeded \$23 million of a \$27 million goal. And in 2009, Alvernia was one of only 119 schools in the country designated by the Carnegie Foundation as a national model for civic engagement and community partnerships.

Key Decisions

At Alvernia, rapid growth from 2000 to 2005—especially the explosion of graduate and off-campus programs—provided the financial foundation and momentum for change. The accompanying expansion of faculty, the judicious addition of two key facilities, and the resulting growth in institutional self-confidence, made possible a reenvisioning of the future, led by a new administration during the planning process of 2005–07. Rather than needing to weather the “perfect storm” of negative conditions facing many schools, Alvernia instead found its stars aligning. During our 2008 50th anniversary, we began implementation of new strategic and campus facilities plans (guided by a financial planning model), established both a University-wide enrollment management division and an integrated marketing program, launched a first-ever comprehensive campaign, and celebrated University status.

How did so much happen so quickly? Five decisions, early in the planning process, have proven to be pivotal:

- **First**, breaking with past practice in which planning had been a top-down function, the Strategic Planning Council (while reporting directly to the president) was comprised entirely of faculty, staff, and students, with no vice presidents as members. It was co-chaired by a respected, but just-tenured, faculty member and a talented young athletic director. Clear, up-front parameters were set: there would be 4 to 7 priorities and no more than 15 goals; trustee, campus, alumni, and community engagement would be ensured; and work would be completed in 15 months. Early on, succinct mission and vision statements were drafted jointly with the president, and then broadly discussed and used to guide subsequent deliberations. Confidence in this group was richly rewarded. The strategic plan has effectively shaped the University’s subsequent progress.
- **Second**, rather than waiting to begin the campus master plan after the conclusion of the strategic plan, we determined that the two processes should proceed simultaneously, timed so that the key assumptions and emerging goals of the strategic plan would help determine the near-term master planning priorities. Trustees strongly endorsed this approach, with three trustees even agreeing to serve on the task force. The architects also functioned as institutional planners, guiding the development of enrollment assumptions and analyses of institutional capacity.
- **Third**, unlike planning efforts that pay lip service to strategic partnerships, Alvernia’s executive team recognized early on that creative partnerships were essential to the expansion of an apparently land-locked campus. An innovative deal with a respected corporation made possible the purchase and renovation of a new high-tech home for the School of Graduate and Continuing Studies. A cash-strapped city gratefully leased a large portion of an adjacent park for a new University Sports Complex. This deal freed up campus space for a competition track and field, as well as for upscale student apartments. The deal also enabled the University to construct a new main campus gate at the park entrance. And the Franciscan Community similarly agreed to make portions of its property available for a new campus entrance road climbing up Mt. Alvernia to historic Francis Hall.

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- **Fourth**, a campaign for \$6.5 million (that had been approved by the Board as the new president was being selected) was cancelled, with the understanding that a far more ambitious campaign would be shaped by the new strategic and master plans. The resulting campaign for \$27 million was organized around the main goals of the strategic priorities: identity, educational quality, student communities, community, and external engagement. (Financial resources was the fifth priority.)

The delay in timing proved indispensable for still other reasons. It provided additional time to begin to remake the advancement division, while board leaders and the president had the opportunity to raise the bar of philanthropic expectations for trustees. Most important, the new shared vision of Alvernia as a “Distinctive Franciscan University,” rather than simply promoting specific building projects or programs, would serve to energize new and familiar donors.

- And, **fifth**, mission and identity were made concrete institutional preoccupations rather than remaining abstract concepts. Not only was the strengthening of “Institutional Identity” adopted as the first priority, but the vision statement highlighted four types of learning (integrated, inclusive, community-based, and ethical learning) as hallmarks of the Alvernia experience, all shaped by the Franciscan ideal of “knowledge joined with love.” And rather than an end in itself, the quest for University status became part of a strategy to rethink the nature of the institution.

Stories of institutional transformation are hardly reducible to a set of decisions or key factors. For Alvernia, coordination of the new enrollment management and marketing divisions has resulted in record new student enrollment (more than 500 in the fall of 2010) and a transformed regional profile (30 percent out of state). Comparatively low tuition and discount rates have produced sizable net revenue increases. A conservative fiscal strategy—developed jointly by administrators and trustees—fully funds depreciation, incorporates contingency planning, and ensures annual surpluses, even as debt is used strategically to leverage capital improvements. Enhanced Board engagement in strategy, oversight, and philanthropy has been essential, along with a creative and collaborative senior team.

The Faculty Excellence Program has introduced endowed professorships and programs to support teaching and scholarship. Faculty-led assessment and distance education initiatives have yielded impressive results; key programs have expanded offerings and achieved accreditation. A campus that in 2005 had 500 residents and little night and weekend activity, today has more than 800 residents; high-profile intramural, campus ministry, and student activity programs; a well-regarded lecture and performing arts series; and new membership in a prestigious National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) conference.

Two institutional signatures have been established: the Center for Ethics and Leadership and the Holleran Center for Community Engagement (the latter supported with a naming gift and a federal grant). For the past year, members of a campus-wide Franciscan Learning Community, supported by in-house and visiting scholars, have immersed themselves in Franciscan sources and begun to shape a comprehensive plan for mission education and integration. And building on an expanded staff and upgraded materials, the marketing division is leading an effort to enhance the brand (The Alvernia Advantage).

Identity and Integration

A moment in time captures the promise and challenges ahead. In March 2007, the Board of Trustees simultaneously approved strategic and campus master plans, a financial planning model, and an unprecedented fundraising campaign, all guided by mission-centered values and an ambitious vision statement.

Implementation of the 10-year plan is a work in progress! Integrating multiple initiatives is not easy. Creative partnerships require special effort. Enrollment and fundraising success produces even more ambitious expectations. Ensuring strategic focus while capitalizing on unexpected opportunities requires a delicate balance. Yet, a strong sense of institutional identity and a passionate commitment to shared values have helped to inspire the Alvernia community to realize our vision of becoming a “Distinctive Franciscan University.”



Dr. Thomas F. Flynn is Alvernia University’s sixth president, a position he has held since his appointment in 2005. Under his leadership, wide-ranging academic initiatives, community partnerships, new and renovated facilities, and significant campus expansion have helped produce record gains in enrollment and unprecedented fundraising success. Previously, Dr. Flynn served as Senior Advisor for the Council of Independent Colleges, where he led a national symposium on the relationship between liberal arts education and professional leadership. He also directed “President-Trustee Dialogues,” regional symposia that brought together more than 150 presidents and trustee leaders to examine governance and institutional strategies.

Dr. Flynn has held leadership roles at Millikin University, initially as Provost and subsequently as President. Additionally, Dr. Flynn spent 14 years on the faculty of Mount Saint Mary’s University, as Professor of English and Dean of the College. A past board member for the American Council of Education and Council of Independent Colleges, Dr. Flynn currently serves on the editorial advisory board of *Liberal Education* and an array of state and local boards. A Boston native, Dr. Flynn received his Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Boston College with his M.A. and Ph.D. in American culture earned at the University of Michigan.

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