

Building A More Sustainable Future

“What kind of universities, with what emphases and what directions, would we run if we were refounding the Society of Jesus in today’s world?... I think that every generation has to recreate the faith; they have to re-create the journey; they have to recreate the institutions. This is not only a good desire. If we lose the ability to re-create, we have lost the spirit.”

— Adolfo Nicolas, S.J., Superior General of the Society of Jesus, April 23, 2010

Almost ten years ago, I outlined for you my vision for our University in a document called “Learning and Integrity: A Strategic Vision for Fairfield University.” As you will all know, the critical emphasis in that vision was integrity — the integration of our core curriculum, the integration of living and learning, the integration of Jesuit values in our professional and graduate education. These three goals were guided by a commitment to diversity, and the embrace of our Jesuit and Catholic mission and identity.

We have made tremendous strides in our implementation of this vision. It informs all that we do — our undergraduate students experience a much more integrated living and learning community on campus, the academic center of which is a core curriculum that analyzes, critiques, and celebrates the breadth of human culture, and thereby highlights our students’ responsibility and dignity as persons. Our graduate and professional programs are distinctive, and appeal to employers because our graduates have been superbly trained and formed to embrace service and ethics as a dimension of their professional expertise.

We can all be very proud of the work that we have done, and I offer my personal gratitude to all of you who have worked so hard in support of this vision.

Now, we must once again “recreate,” renew, and reimagine Fairfield in the spirit called for by Fr. Nicolas, taking up this task in response to a higher education environment that has fundamentally changed, with ramifications that are still emerging. We must respond with energy and imagination, creating a bold new vision for the future that ensures our viability, builds upon our foundations, and propels us to a leadership position in this new era of higher education.

With confidence in our ability to meet these challenges, today I ask you to join me as we launch a total refresh of our Strategic Plan. “Fairfield 2020: Building a More Sustainable Future” will be a campus-wide project, involving faculty, students, alumni, administrators, and trustees. We will be forming a number of task forces that will review every aspect of our operations, charged to find greater efficiencies, identify new programs that have the potential to meet market demands, explore how to integrate online learning into our operations, and examine other areas of concern. No element of our operations will be exempted from review.

Our institutional mission will not change. Our core commitment to provide a residential undergraduate education to young men and women, with a common core curriculum and an emphasis on the formation of the whole person — the tradition of a Jesuit and Catholic education — will always remain our fundamental dedication. So, too, will our commitment to continue as a master’s-level, comprehensive University, with graduate and professional schools of distinction.

Quite candidly, then, the financial model on which Fairfield has operated throughout its history, principally dependent on undergraduate student tuition to fund our operations, has reached an impasse that we must address if we are to thrive and grow.

I am sure you are all aware of the demographic and economic factors that we are currently facing. What we have yet fully to embrace — and now we must — is that these trends reflect a profound change to the status quo.

- For the last several years we have tried to maintain a cap on tuition. Even so, we have had to increase our financial aid, both to compete for the students we want to bring to Fairfield and to support families who cannot shoulder the burden of the cost.
- Nevertheless, the costs of running the University, maintaining our benefits programs, retaining and hiring faculty and administrators, and accommodating worthy students, continue to rise or are under pressure.
- Given these trends, without broadening our current economic model, we will be unable to operate with a balanced budget within the next few years.
- Long-term demographic trends suggest that there will be fewer prospective undergraduates, particularly in the Northeast, for the foreseeable future. One recent report suggests that the number of high school graduates in our region will decline by 10 percent or more over the next 15 years.
- Culturally, there are widely articulated doubts about the value proposition of a four-year undergraduate education, particularly with other forms of educational programs available in more flexible models and cost-efficient formats. While often overstated, these doubts point to real concerns that we ignore at our peril.
- More concretely, deeper shifts in the dynamics of our economy suggest that fewer families will be in a position to afford the kind of education that Fairfield has to offer — even if they desire it. Middle-class incomes have remained flat for over a decade, and the general debt burden of our families has increased. In short, the “middle-class” is eroding. Most economists see no reason to believe this trend will reverse itself. If we don’t change our financial model, we will be compelled to accept students based on their ability to pay, and will be increasingly challenged in our efforts to diversify our campus culture and serve all worthy students, regardless of their socio-economic background. I don’t think this is the kind of institution that we want to become.

These are not temporary trends. They are converging forces that demand a sense of urgency from us all. We can and must remain dedicated to a personal formation model for our undergraduate students, teaching and mentoring the leaders of tomorrow. But we must also broaden our economic foundation in order to be competitive in the future. If we aren’t financially healthy and able to grow, we will not be able to deliver our mission effectively, and we will be in danger of undermining the foundation of integrity that we have all worked so hard to build and maintain.

“Fairfield 2020” challenges us all to build a more sustainable future. Below are the 10 overarching principles that I will be asking the task forces, under the guidance of a Steering Committee, to observe:

- To build and implement a new business model that broadens our revenue streams and makes our costs more responsive to our articulated priorities.
- To lead in transformational education and pedagogical innovation and research that makes a difference. To ensure we have an active and engaged faculty of teacher-scholars who make mentoring and advising a priority.
- To find ways to keep a Fairfield education within the financial reach of the average student so as to avoid the crushing burden of excessive student debt.
- To focus on outcomes and ensure our students are well prepared and positioned to capture and fulfill their aspirations in the workplace, graduate school, or public service.
- To dedicate ourselves to the delivery of a revised core curriculum, a more agile and integrated core in the Jesuit and Catholic tradition, one that builds key competencies as it foregrounds the breadth of the intellectual life with an interdisciplinary focus.
- To leverage best practices and technologies to streamline and modernize our back office operations and lower our costs.
- To re-launch our continuing education and non-degree based programs. To address more fully that underserved need.
- To grow and enhance the quality, stature, and identity of our graduate and professional schools.
- To create an environment that reaches out to and welcomes diverse students, faculty, and staff in a way that recognizes the changing demographics of our candidate pools and critically engages the social, racial, ethnic, religious, and economic diversity that is necessary for a community that calls itself “catholic.” To become an employer of choice.
- To renew and invigorate the total school experience for undergraduate, graduate, and continuing education students in order to ensure our students have access to state-of-the-art facilities, a complete suite of support services, and welcoming living and learning communities.

Fairfield 2020 will seek to harness the enormous talent and creativity resident on this campus, so we can find solutions — together — to the challenges I have outlined above.

To meet these challenges, we need a visible and palpable cultural shift, one that draws both readily and deeply from the expertise on campus. We must develop a “change-capable culture,” a culture that can assess with data, dialogue across divisions, and structurally implement change more quickly, more competently, and more effectively.

The students of the future will be asking more from us. They will always need the intellectual, moral, and personal formation that has been, and will continue to be, the hallmark of Jesuit education. But the students of the future will also require programs that meet market needs and emerging economic opportunities. The Fairfield of the future will be more responsive to these needs, preparing our students not only for the immediate future but also able to position them for still emerging opportunities — because we ourselves will have become more fleet-of-foot, more forward-looking, and more flexibly responsive to changing circumstances.

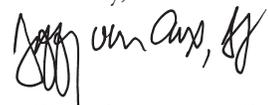
- How can we make it easier for part-time students to study with us, whether to acquire their undergraduate degree, or professional or graduate degrees?
- How will we develop and support online learning, so that we can offer our expertise to more students in a manner better suited to the shape of their lives?
- How might we offer non-traditional students — online students or part-time students — a pathway of mentorship, an introduction to Ignatian values? What would *cura personalis* look like if we were to offer courses online?
- How will we continue to express our commitment to social justice, and deepen our service to the local community? What might an online service-learning program look like? Could we coordinate such a program for partner institutions?
- Given the opportunities that technology affords us to share resources, teaching, and other student services, how might Fairfield leverage these technologies to expand our programs? How might we partner with other institutions around the world to create even more dynamic partnerships and global learning experiences?
- And how do we better clarify and express the value proposition of a Fairfield education? How do we make a stronger case for this value proposition?

These are just a few of questions and opportunities that this refresh of our Strategic Plan will address.

This will be a serious undertaking, one of institutional soul-searching. I appreciate that this process will ask all of you to examine the assumptions on which we have worked for many years, and that is never easy.

Having said that, I also believe that we all appreciate the need to continuously re-create Fairfield if we are to remain relevant, and if we wish to sustain our mission. I'm confident — given the talent and dedication of our community — that we will develop an exciting model for the next decade of our development, and I look forward to working in collaboration with you all as we chart a course for the future of our University.

Sincerely,



Jeffrey P. von Arx, S.J.

President