The Front Cover includes all questions asked during the interviews, in order. Questions are coded in ten categories.

Conversations with the provost about leadership and change

Washington University in St. Louis

This place

Who should be the next provost? Holden Thorp, about how he might go about improving these interactions between Danforth and Medicine, what would you suggest? In the biological sciences, it would be useful to articulate? If you could have a clean slate, would you make the university less decentralized? So the provost should have the authority to command and control the way things are done? You look out ten years? Washington University has seen incredible success over the last 25 years. What's your short version of the history that explains that success? Of things about diversity, what would you say? Ed, how do we reach beyond disciplinary boundaries? Where are the opportunities to create more synergy and innovation? Why shouldn't we put a campus in Denver? What are you thinking?

Edward S. Macias

Washington University in St. Louis

Role of the provost

Leadership characteristics

History of the institution

Choosing priorities

How should we have done this?

Peer institutions

Higher education

New leadership
Conversations with the provost about leadership and change

Edward S. Macias
Washington University, 2013

This place
Contents

6 Foreword Heather A. Corcoran

8 Our people Adrienne D. Davis

16 Between disciplines Ralph S. Quatrano

23 Our place in the world Henry S. Webber

28 Students Jennifer R. Smith

36 Disruptive forces Marion G. Crain

46 in St. Louis Amanda Moore McBride

53 The future of the humanities Gerald Early

56 Equilibrium Carmon Colangelo

62 De [centralize]? Todd R. Zenger

68 Bridging the two-mile gap Helen Piwnica-Worms

74 Last word Mark S. Wrighton

80 Afterword Edward S. Macias
Foreword

Heather A. Corcoran
Associate Professor of Design

On July 1, 2013, the academic leadership of Washington University in St. Louis will change hands. Ed Macias, who has served as our chief academic officer for 25 years, is stepping down. His tenure included two periods as provost and one as dean of Arts & Sciences. In 25 years, the university has grown dramatically in quality, stature, and rank—across the undergraduate program, admissions, and research; and in all of the professional and graduate schools. In recent years, initiatives to diversify faculty, students, and staff, support interdisciplinary work, and unify academic programs, have defined the Office of the Provost. They begin to establish a new framework and set of priorities for the institution, perhaps changing our path for the future.

What does a change in leadership mean? What ways of leading have proven effective for our culture? What ways of working do we want to preserve? What new ideas should we test?

I served as one of four Faculty Fellows in the provost’s office from 2012 to 2013. In this role, I worked with Ed to develop a project about academic leadership at Washington University. I invited 11 of our academic leaders, representing a range of disciplines, roles, and ranks, to interview the provost. The goal was to draw out insights about how our institution works, how the parts relate to the whole, how different fields are represented and commingle, and what kind of institutional change is afoot. The interviews were conducted between January 24 and April 8, 2013. They have been transcribed and edited, and they appear on the pages that follow.

We are a complicated and diverse institution. This project is not comprehensive, by any means. It presents a selection of perspectives, with the hope of prompting further discussion, as we move to a new era.

I attended the interviews, edited the transcripts, and designed the book. I summarize what I learned about academic leadership and change at Washington University in the form of the following recommendations. Our academic leaders should strive to:

Understand our culture and individual people in it.
Be interested in faculty and their research.
Know the numbers and know them well.
Have honest and consistent conversations.
Try curricular things that might not work; experiment.
Use technology in curricular experiments.
Adapt ideas to our culture.
Face the challenges of decentralization.
Grow people here by giving them chances to do things.
Be flexible.
Look ahead, constantly.
Keep a sense of humor.
In an institution of competing priorities, strive for balance.

I hope the book will be relevant to the many academic leaders of Washington University—named and unnamed, and to those who may wish for a leadership role in the future.

I owe thanks to many people who indulged my interest in doing this. First and foremost, I want to thank Ed for his support, good humor, and wise answers, and for a big chunk of his time. This has been an invaluable learning experience, and I will always be grateful to have spent time in this way.

The interviewers asked the thoughtful, probing questions that made the project work. They gave energy and time, and their names are peppered throughout the book: Adrienne Davis, Ralph Quatrano, Hank Webber, Jen Smith, Marion Crain, Amanda Moore McBride, Gerald Early, Carmon Colangelo, Todd Zenger, and Helen Pownca-Worms. The final participant was Mark Wrighton, who also generously provided funding. Thank you.

My partners were Shelley Milligan and Ellen Rostand, without whom there would be no project. Their judgment is top-notch. Again, I thank you.

Additional thanks to Debora Burgess, James Byard, Roddy Roediger, Kathleen McDermott, Liz Wolfson, Kelly Mandrie, Rachel Linck, Sue Hosack, Rob Wild, Makenzie Kressin ’13, and alumna Sandy Speicher, who is my design inspiration.
Ed, why is diversity so important for universities?

To be a successful university today, and certainly in the future, you can’t make it if you don’t diversify all of your people — faculty, students, and staff. You have to reflect society.

Why is diversity hard for universities? Why is it harder for us than it is for corporations?

I don’t think it comes naturally to anyone, and this is particularly true in industries that have been historically white and male-dominated. The university is a meritocracy, and I think it’s easy to assume that the best people are the people most like you. If you’re a white male, you’re likely to assume that the best candidate is a white male. I think that’s human nature. I don’t think it has anything to do with being at a university.

I was struck by the military’s recent announcement to end the combat exclusion role for women. In other major organizations — whether it’s the military, government, or the corporate world — when the top decides to do something, they just tell everyone to do it. But, at a university, we can’t really tell people what to do. Universities are not hierarchical in the same way.

So why is it different for us? It is because our system is set up to be governed by many. We have many small groups that make faculty hiring decisions, and it’s hard to dictate an outcome to them other than to say “go get the best person.” For us to change, we have to work on this at the level of individual search committees, and that is what we are doing.

You have spent a lot of time looking at our peers and many other institutions over the course of 25 years. Some want to be like us, and others we want to emulate. What are the most effective ways you’ve seen universities approach diversity?
I have spent a lot of time thinking about Duke, a Southern university that has had some historical issues related to diversity. In 1988, Duke said it would double the number of African-American faculty members. It wasn’t a double goal; it was an aspirational goal. But they set it.

Five years later, they had made a huge difference in the makeup of their faculty, even though they didn’t hit the goal. The aspirational approach worked. I thought that setting an aspirational goal was a huge mistake, but I was wrong. Aspirational goals do matter. Maybe that’s how you get a group of people working toward a common goal in an academic setting. You make your aspirations and expectations clear, and then you hold people to it. It is also important to measure progress, which Duke built into its process. Each department had to report whether they made the goal or not. That’s pretty cool.

Part of the role of a provost is to get buy-in for important institutional initiatives, particularly ones that are not instantly popular. What is the role of the provost in trying to move diversity forward? Have you noticed ways that working on diversity is different from other institutional initiatives?

The way we are addressing diversity is probably similar to the way we approach other initiatives. We’ve made good progress with faculty diversity because we’ve made our deans responsible. If they want to delegate it to a department chair or a hiring committee, that’s fine, but we’ve been clear that each dean is ultimately accountable.

Data has played an important role. For example, we started doing gender pay equity studies nearly 30 years ago; over time, these studies have affected the way that we think about faculty salaries. I remember when Marty Israel was dean of Arts & Sciences in 1987. He took responsibility for the study that year himself. Marty was wonderful. He is a detail guy and very quantitatively oriented. Ed Spitznagel, Lynn McCloskey, and Brian Bannister were also important in figuring out the methodology, which wasn’t easy. It was focused on Arts & Sciences, where we had the most data at the time. The methodology is even more complex today.

We kept doing this about every five years and expanded to the other Danforth schools. The Faculty Senate Council commissioned several of the studies; it’s their job to decide the timing. Once we reinstated the provost position in 2009, the studies were administered through my office. So far, we have completed two this way. The medical school wasn’t part of the process at first, but then they began to do their own and are now quite regular about it.

What changes did you see in the deans’ attitudes about diversity over time?

At the beginning, the deans asked a lot of questions about why we were doing this and what model we were using. Eventually, they saw it as a model to improve decision making. It has affected the way we think about hiring—how salaries are set and whom we choose to hire. If we don’t invite a diverse candidate pool, we’re not going to get a diverse faculty. The studies provide a context to think about that.

Twenty years ago, deans were not so clear about this. I think it’s an evolutionary process. The provost’s office plays a role, but you’ve got to get the others—the search committees and the department chairs and the deans—to take responsibility.

And that seems to be the crucial role that you’ve played.

That’s the provost’s job—to make expectations clear and hold people accountable. Today, the deans hold me accountable: “Is this a priority or isn’t it? Are you going to help us?” That’s wonderful. That’s the best possible change.

So, when you have a new dean coming in, do you feel that you need to socialize him or her into how focused we are on diversity?

I think he or she will get it from the others. It’s really in the air now. The provost has to help the deans see their role in this priority.

When you think back over your two terms as provost, what are some of our biggest challenges related to diversity and what are some of the biggest successes?

The biggest challenge is making people believe that we’re serious. If you go down to the Quad and ask people, “Is diversity important?” they all say, “Yes, it’s really important.” But when you’re on that search committee, does that come into your mind?

I think it does more and more.

I hope so. It’s great to have the top people—chancellor, provost—supporting the idea, but that isn’t enough. There are many important ideas coming from the higher administration that faculty make a point of ignoring.
What are some of the biggest successes or things that you didn’t think we’d be able to do?

Well, 25% of the hires on the Danforth Campus were underrepresented minorities last year — 11 out of 44 hires. I’m very happy about this. We’ve had years when 50% of the faculty we hired were women, which was great. But it’s much harder to hire an African American because the pool of candidates is much smaller. Since the number of women on the faculty is much larger than the number of — say, African Americans — it is hard to show fast change in the percentage of women. We had so few African Americans a few years ago that adding one or two people looked like a large percentage improvement. But how about when we have 30% women, roughly, as we do? Getting to 40% requires a lot of hires. I don’t think we should lose sight of that. Maybe that’s a challenge that seems secondary. But the fact is that there are areas where we have no women or almost no women faculty.

I think it’s great that departments have continued to make strides. Women now make up 32% of the medical school faculty, which is almost the national average in academic medicine. I always thought it would happen naturally, but the pace is too slow. If you plot when we’ll get to 40% or 45% — it’s forever. It will take a couple of decades. We’re going up a percent or two at a time, which is great, but if we’re off by 20%, that’s a long time.

How has your own thinking on diversity evolved over the years?

What has surprised you?

I never thought I’d live to see a woman on the executive faculty at the medical school. And then boom, it happened. In the past, the medical school looked outside to fill top positions. But recently, the Department of Medicine — which is the largest department — put Vicky Fraser in the top position. They promoted from within, and that’s a real change.

So now we have women scientists heading our two biggest units: Arts & Sciences and the Department of Medicine. And they were longtime insiders. It’s a very big deal.

What has surprised you?

The number of African-American faculty on the Medical Campus has grown: 24 → 41 in five years, increasing the number of underrepresented minorities overall on the Medical Campus by over 50%.

The percentage of tenured women has more than doubled in the last 20 years: 12% → 29%

Do you think hiring from within represents a path for diversity?

I think it’s a good path if we can show more self-confidence as an institution. We sometimes say, “We’ve got this person within the institution, but we have to go outside.” That means the outsider comes from an institution that we think is better than ours. And if we do promote from within, the response is, “Yes, she came from inside because we couldn’t get Dr. Big from outside.” But if you look at other really good places, they don’t have this problem. They are proud to promote from within. If we can get over this inferiority complex, then the idea of building leaders from within will work. But if we can’t, then we will end up building leaders for somebody else because at some point our people will go to other institutions.

We talk about how diversity contributes to excellence. Maybe there’s a moment when diversity becomes easier for us because we understand ourselves to be excellent. We believe that we have the best people.

Yes, over time, I think that’s right. We want to develop our own leaders. If that becomes the culture so that we add more women leaders and underrepresented minorities into the mix, we’re better off.

Diverse leadership has been one of your big priorities since you became provost again. You are now trying to think about succession planning — grooming the next generation of leaders and inspiring people to think about a possible path in leadership. Can you talk more about the challenges that you see as you try to prepare the next generation and ensure that we have a diverse pool we can draw from?

The main thing is to identify leaders early. We’ve done that in lots of ways. For the staff, for example, we have leadership development programs like PLAN (Professional Leadership Academy & Network). And for the faculty, we offer leadership opportunities in various ways.

You know, Tony LaRussa was a very successful manager of the Cardinals. He kept winning, so it worked, and he was very successful. But it caught up to him in his last few years. Today, the Cardinals have built a much stronger farm team. They are developing their own, and it makes it much more interesting to sign with the Cardinals. To me, that’s it. The manager has to be willing to pick people from the farm team and not just hire from outside.

The plan for diversity has more than doubled in the last five years, increasing the number of underrepresented minorities overall on the Medical Campus by over 50%.

The percentage of tenured women has more than doubled in the last 20 years: 12% → 29%
Have you noticed changes in decision making or governance as different kinds of people come into the room?

Yes. I first noticed it in the law school, which hired a lot of women onto the faculty — much earlier than other schools on campus. Their conversations were different. Who should we search for? What do we have to do to change our culture?

And culture is a big deal. I’ll give you an example. When I came here, people would smoke during chemistry faculty meetings. People like me who didn’t smoke hated it. And you couldn’t get people to stop. Eventually, times changed, and the institution decided that you couldn’t smoke. It’s hard to imagine anyone smoking in a faculty meeting today. Faculty attitudes change over time.

It’s the same with any issue. If you can get the faculty to start thinking that this is the way it should go, they’ll drum out the outliers. As you get more women on your faculty, the little stuff and the big stuff will change. The inappropriate talk will change, and the direction that you’re heading will change. It’s just inevitable.

It’s true. I know in the law school, long before I came, some of the senior women went to some of the senior men to ask them to change their treatment of junior women. They did it in a way that the junior faculty couldn’t for themselves. It stopped.

It’s like smoking. You could smoke in your office. When we went to no smoking, people kept saying, “How are we going to do this?” I said, “Just put up signs, no smoking.” When people said, “Who is going to enforce it?”, I replied, “Nobody.” Over time, people will make sure that others follow the rule.

You have mentored so many women in so many different capacities. Do you see differences in how one inspires women and how one inspires men?

That’s a hard question. There are differences, but at the end of the day, I think people just want to know how to succeed, and they want someone to listen. When I first became department chair, a senior faculty member walked into my office with a problem that was mostly personal. And I thought, “What are you doing talking to me? I’m a young whippersnapper that you hired. What do I know?” And then I realized what the office of the chair meant. It’s a big deal. I think that everybody in academic leadership has to be like the Wizard of Oz. You’ve got to help without necessarily knowing how to do it.

What we can’t say is, “What do I know? Get out of my office.” We’ve got to listen. It doesn’t matter if it’s a man or a woman. We’ve got to listen to what the issues are.
Ed, how do we reach beyond disciplinary boundaries? Where are the opportunities to create more synergy and work on the fringes of disciplines?

Interdisciplinary work is essential. The institutions that do the best interdisciplinary work are going to win because society’s most interesting problems require working across disciplines. Our future faculty will want and expect it.

The provost’s office can play a big role in facilitating this work. We certainly try to create the sense that it is important and requires some centralization. What we really need to talk about, however, is incentives. The reason why this kind of work hasn’t been built into our culture overnight is that the incentives aren’t lined up as well as they could be.

In a lot of ways, undergraduates are already doing interdisciplinary work. Sixty percent of engineering undergraduates double major, minor, or concentrate outside their major area. Do students need incentives? No, but they need to see that we support them. We advertise that it’s easy to double major, to explore the arts and sciences from engineering, etc. What more could the provost’s office do to help students?

I think we need a broader view of what a liberal arts education is today. I don’t think a student can be well educated in the United States without a solid foundation. However, I think the liberal arts have to be more cognizant of how important the professions are to that foundation, and vice versa. Of course, we also want students to spend a lot of time on their major, minor, specific degree, etc.

I would like to see courses where Arts & Sciences faculty and professional school faculty work together. One approach is to do it thematically. Take climate change as an example. Lawyers, architects, engineers, social scientists all have a role to play, and all of these areas are represented on our faculty.
We could build a program that would give us the chance to learn from each other in new ways. I would consider it a success if an engineering student responded to such an initiative by saying, “I should learn more about environmental engineering, but I think I better learn something about social policy, too.”

This thematic idea changes the definition of an education. It goes beyond interdisciplinary. It focuses on a major problem that students can wrap their heads around. All of the major problems facing our planet/societies require a mix of experts to work together.

We think about engineering today as a profession that is about solving problems, so it would be extremely adaptable to the thematic approach. Many of our alumni apply their engineering skills to major challenges in finance, law, or medicine once they have been out of school a few years. They change because they see interesting problems to solve. This kind of program would prepare them for that.

When a student applies for a job or to graduate school, if he or she can say, “Here are some things that are really important to my field, but also involve other fields,” then we have succeeded. By moving to course work that has multiple disciplines built into a single theme, students will become more interesting graduate students, employees, and people.

The second thing I’d mention is a mistake I remember making years ago. Back in the 1990s, we started pushing the idea of dual degrees. The implementation had gotten complicated, so in a meeting one day I said, “Why don’t we limit the degree pairings to ones that we know students will select?” Let’s not waste time thinking about engineering and art because that combination is never going to happen.” Faculty looked at me and said, “Ed, we have about ten students doing that already.” Graphic design and computer science are a logical combination today, but, at that time, mixing art and engineering didn’t seem likely. We need to pay close attention to the students and the choices they make.

How do we incentivize faculty to think about this?

Marion Crain has spent a lot of time this year talking to faculty about their interests and possible topics. Many want to work this way, but they see barriers. Maybe reducing barriers is the priority.

When we talk to deans about interdisciplinary work, they worry about the impact on their schools. They say, “That’s a nice idea, but I’m going to lose money. Instead of having Ralph here teach introduction to biology, now he’s going to teach some interdisciplinary course on climate change, and I’ll have to hire somebody else to teach introductory biology. And I only get a piece of the interdisciplinary course revenue.” We have to build a new model.

There are some macro changes needed to make this work. I think our faculties have to reconceive a bit of our undergraduate education to put into practice some interdisciplinary ideas. To do that, I think there are a few basic things we have to remember.

The first is that we have to respect each other across fields. This really isn’t about dumbing down a body of knowledge, but instead involving different groups of people and changing the conversation.

If we assume that every student—undergraduate through master’s or PhD—is going to be a college professor, then we will not change our current curriculum. The only problem is that there are very few college jobs and a lot of students, many of whom do not want to work in academia. We need more tracks. We need to have degrees for students who are not interested in a PhD. You’ve already talked about the applied sciences. Those students would have more room in their education. They would probably be better graduate students and employees as a result.

We also should abbreviate our current curricula in certain areas. There are areas where we are too dense and we need more flexibility. When biology loses Ralph because he is over here teaching climate change, then maybe there’s some other course we don’t need to offer as often. Right now, you can’t get anybody to agree on dropping anything. We should look at our curricula for different ways to get students to similar places. But that will only happen if we really believe in interdisciplinary studies.

I think you need to have people who want it, but I don’t think a revolution has to occur. I think that this could happen in maybe one topic area.

Yes, we only need one initially, and it can be changed every few years. You could have one on public health, or security—think of the breach at the New York Times.

But we don’t want to lose our sense of depth overall.

I completely agree. We can diversify the paths, but leave the depth. Let me give you an example in the field that I know best—chemistry. The undergraduate chemistry curriculum seldom changes. There is a long sequence of courses required for the major, and students have always taken biochemistry at the very end. We finally dropped the requirement for some of the physical chemistry, allowing students to take biochemistry earlier. That didn’t make it a less deep degree, but it did leave off some requirements so that students could choose to do something else that broadened them. Nothing fell apart. The graduates are just as strong. It’s not exactly interdisciplinary, but it’s a start.
This leads us to graduate students. Let’s talk about jobs. A few engineers get really good jobs with a bachelor’s degree, but they get even better ones with a master’s. I really think we need to change our curriculum for graduate students. As you know, we have a large number of postdoctoral fellows on our campus. Many of them will not get jobs at research universities. I think that we could establish tracks for graduate students as well. We might want to change the length of time to degree. We might have a track that is geared toward research and teaching; we may offer one that is more discipline-oriented, but has a business component. This would help us connect students to different kinds of opportunities, linked to various kinds of graduate and professional degrees.

This is easier in some fields than others. The Olin Business School came up with a version of this. They’ve got the PhD, and those graduates are expected to get academic positions. They also offer a doctorate of business administration, which is centered on applied research for industry instead of academic research.

You know, the issue of facilities is related to thinking about research in this more flexible way. There is currently a push in engineering and science to build big interdisciplinary buildings. The idea is that you put a biologist next to a chemical engineer next to a mathematician, and something good happens. This seems to work in some places, but it isn’t perfect. We need to think hard about what will motivate people. One challenge is that the mathematician may be sitting there feeling isolated from the people in his or her field.

I think it should be time-limited — a three-year commitment might work — rather than a permanent move. And this goes well beyond the sciences. Imagine someone in design or art leaving for three years or someone in engineering moving into the Sam Fox School.

What got me thinking about this was an experience I had at my previous position at UNC-Chapel Hill. We hired a particular type of geneticist from UCLA, and his building in the medical school wasn’t ready. We had an open space in our new building next to a geneticist in biology. The person moved in for a couple of years. As soon as the new building was done, he left. But a relationship had been built between that geneticist and the lab in biology that was just incredible.

We’ve got to prioritize longer-term issues over short-term needs. Everyone has a shortage of space. We always try to solve the space crunch in the chemistry department, the English department, or wherever. As long as we keep doing that, our resources support people working in separate areas. We could say, “We have a space crunch, but we’re going to tear something down and put up an interdisciplinary building that isn’t owned by any one discipline.”

It might be easier if people understand that it’s not absolutely permanent, that we can see if it works and expand or contract it later. But facilities are a huge thing. They’re so costly. I think you have to weigh all of these factors in how you operate. Ultimately, I think it comes down to the provost.

If buildings become so expensive that we slow down the construction of new space, we might see some positive outcomes. New space would become very valuable. And if we put a premium on interdisciplinary interactions, then we would give that space to whoever is doing this type of work.

If we had a chemical engineering and material science building, and interspersed in there were physicists and chemists involved with material science, then we’d be in a good position to apply for a teaching or research training grant. But it gets a little dicey. As with everything else, we are a decentralized university. We get into the issue of who is paying rent on which space, etc.

There’s another problem with interdisciplinary work in a decentralized setting. You have to spread around the praise. Everyone likes to say, “That was my school or my department.” You never hear, “It’s the university doing this.” We’re not there yet.

But something as basic as communicating more about our goals and initiatives is a big help. And we’ve done a lot more of that lately.

When I started as provost in ’09, I held regular meetings with the deans. At first I set the agenda, and that worked just fine. Today, it comes as much from the deans as from me. Everyone has things they need to discuss with their colleagues. It’s a very different atmosphere.

You can’t be interdisciplinary without feeling like you’re part of a team. But one of the challenges is that we use different languages. I think it’s a common problem. A faculty group on campus is working on the issue of collective memory right now; psychologists and historians are part of it. But even though memory is a big part of what the historians say and memory is a big part of what the psychologists say, the word needs a common meaning when they work together.

Eight years ago, working in collaboration with two systems engineers and a colleague in biology, we received a five-year National Science Foundation grant related to genetic regulatory networks. Who would have thought that two biologists and two systems engineers would get together on this topic? We extracted information from data and ended up with an appreciation for how different viewpoints and disciplines can work together. Within a matter of two years, everybody on the grant converged on the topic and problem.

Which means we’ve got to work together for a while to figure this out. Maybe that’s the real lesson.
Ed, you’ve been the chief academic officer during a period in which Washington University has made tremendous progress. No institution of higher education in America has improved more in the last 25 years. What have been the keys to this success?

It’s important to know that we were doing a good job when I walked in the door. Maybe we weren’t as well known as we are today, but we had faculty who were committed to teaching and to taking the time to provide a first-rate education. We have built on something that already was powerful. But we were underperforming in some ways, too. The number of applications to our undergraduate program was low. Student morale wasn’t as high as it is now. Washington University was a good place, but it wasn’t a top place.

First, we changed the way we recruited undergraduate students, and that made a fundamental difference. John Berg helped us see admissions as a top priority. Today, students are very happy to be here. This year, we had 30,000 applications. When I was a faculty member in chemistry, Arts & Sciences enrolled fewer than 600 first-year students one year. We were accepting almost every eligible student, and we still weren’t getting enough.

Second, we worked together to build a curriculum that allowed students to study in multiple areas. And today, most of our students do. If a student says, “I’m interested in art and I’m also interested in Spanish, and I might want to do business finance,” we say, “Fine, you can do it.” It has taken a lot of work over the last three decades to get everybody to play ball, and we’re not there yet. But it’s much better than it was. Some of our sister institutions don’t allow this type of integration.
Our competition in higher education is longer-standing, wealthier institutions. What will we have to do to recruit the brightest, most diverse undergraduate students in the future?

If we want to get the very best students, we’ve got to be able to get them, regardless of economic circumstance, which means more scholarship money. We also need to keep revising our undergraduate program. We can’t ever say, “We finally got there.” We need to make some fundamental changes to the relationship between the liberal arts and the professional schools. Liberal arts colleges don’t have professional schools; many big research universities don’t have the culture of personal interaction that we do. It seems to me that, with some modest changes, we really can reconceive liberal arts education.

What’s the role of the provost in achieving these changes?

The provost has two jobs—providing the incentive and working across schools. It’s hard to make changes when everything is going well; it’s easy when things are falling apart. There has to be someone driving this change who says, “Here’s the incentive. Here’s why we have to do this. It might be uncomfortable at first.” I think it has to come out of the provost’s office, who says, “We finally got there.” We need to make some fundamental changes to the whole. It’s an optimization problem. Washington University didn’t have a provost for many years. Was that a mistake?

Universities have provosts in part because of the economics principle that what maximizes the value of each subunit does not maximize the value of the whole. A businessperson might say that higher education is training too many PhD students, that we are paying students to study for careers that most of them won’t achieve. How do we shrink the number of students?

The simple answer is admit fewer. But there’s a fundamental problem related to the idea of change. If you’re a faculty member and you come to a research institution like Washington University, you expect to be an active part of the PhD program. If we shrink or do away with some of our programs, it will change faculty recruiting. Now, if the whole system changes and everyone has fewer PhD students, then maybe you can’t make that claim anymore. But that kind of change is very slow.

Wouldn’t American higher education be better off if institutions like Washington University had fewer, larger PhD programs instead of more, smaller ones?

That’s a good question to test. And even if we decide that we should reshape programs, we don’t have a model for making decisions. Should we be doing cooperative work like you described, or should we scale program by program? Program by program seems dangerous because the job market changes. Our new consortium for online learning could provide flexibility, and the ability to build expertise here and there. We could even do cooperative teaching using some sort of online method. That might be a model in a new world to retain a good graduate program that is smaller.

We have to rethink the purpose of the PhD to lead to more wide-ranging outcomes. Some people choose the degree simply because they love it. Others worry about what they will do after they finish. If you earn a PhD in history, you might teach at a college. Or you might think of teaching at a high school or prep school. You might think about working in government service. You might look for certain kinds of jobs in industry where a history PhD would be valued. I am not aware of extensive conversations about those options.
If we’re forced into a similar strategy of investment and we have the 20th-largest endowment in the country, aren’t we inevitably the 20th-best university? What allows us to punch above our financial resources? The teams with the highest payrolls don’t necessarily win the World Series. Sometimes low-payroll teams win. However, the teams with the highest payrolls are in there more often. And the schools with the largest endowments are near the top more often.

We have to be like the Oakland Athletics. We’ve got to figure out how to evaluate talent and go into areas where we can have the most impact. We’ve done a great job in psychology, which is a very crowded field. Initially, we couldn’t compete across the board in psychology. So we started building in cognitive neuropsychology. We built a great group of faculty in cooperation with the medical school. We can do this in other areas if we are selective. That is an argument for cleverness and execution. You’re playing the same game that President Peter Salovey, the former provost, is playing at Yale. But Yale has somewhere on the order of $700 million to $1 billion more to spend annually than we do. What’s the process that the provost and chancellor lead that lets us be cleverer than Yale? How do we organize ourselves to do that?

It’s about good people. I don’t think success comes from developing a great blueprint and following it. It doesn’t hurt to have a blueprint; it doesn’t hurt to have priorities. But if someone walks in the door and she’s somebody who can lead us, we should move resources in that direction. There’s a certain amount of believing in people. We have an advantage because we’re smaller than other big research institutions. We should be able to know where our strengths lie. You’re arguing that the model is in part betting on good ideas. Betting on good ideas from good people. Let me give you an example. Ray Arvidson said to me some years ago, “Ed, we’ve got students doing environmental studies as a special major. We’re cobbling things together. We’ve got lots of good people. They want to work together. They’ve got research areas that could cooperate. We need to build a real undergraduate environmental studies program.” We did. We even brought in Joe Deal, who was the dean of the art school, and English professors because there was real interest in the literature of the environment. Little by little, we built a first-rate environmental studies program. Maybe more importantly, we got people to work together in new ways so we could find a unique strength. Duke and Yale opted to build schools, but we didn’t want to create a bigger structure. We kept it as an interdisciplinary effort, and it’s a really good program.
On the flip side, in most businesses, when you have good periods, you expand. This industry has gone through a period of modest expansion and we've modestly expanded, at least in terms of student enrollment. In terms of research activity, we've expanded dramatically—which has led to big growth in staff, big growth in faculty, predominantly at the medical center. Some of our peers have been modestly more aggressive than we have. NYU has been much more aggressive. Many have taken their brands and leveraged them geographically. We've done some of this, too—our business school efforts in Kansas City, for example. Should we be more aggressive? Denver is a city the size of St. Louis, and it has very good air travel access. It is a regional center because it doesn't have Chicago 300 miles north or Atlanta 500 miles to the southeast. It has a good, but not spectacular, public university nearby. Why shouldn’t we put a campus in Denver?

We could. That’s a $200-million question. If you’re going to build a real campus, you’re going to have to build some pretty expensive spaces. Why wouldn’t you go online? That seems like the way to build a campus today. Develop an online undergraduate degree, through our consortium, perhaps. Sell it to the world. We could probably get venture capital to help.

Last time I looked, our endowment was at about $5.6 billion. Would we be better off if we had $5.5 billion for everything we do today, and we put $100 million into taking the shot at some very large investment? If it works, we have redefined ourselves in some important way. If it doesn’t work, we have lost $100 million.

I think that’s what we’re starting to do with online education, but we probably should do more.

But we’re investing the way we always invest—carefully, a little at a time. Should the new provost be thinking about something bigger? I think you’ve presented a compelling argument for why it has to be the provost or the chancellor who makes these decisions. It has to be central for the entire university. Is it the role of the provost to say, “What are a couple of really big things that might move us as an institution?”

Yes, absolutely. It’s time to get a new provost because we need to look at some big new things. We’re moving to a new era.
Students!

Jennifer R. Smith
Dean, College of Arts & Sciences
Associate Professor of Earth and Planetary Sciences

“We are working on new models for students to study the most pressing problems of our society.”

Ed, what are the goals for undergraduate education at Washington University?

Traditional students start when they are 17 or 18, and they graduate when they are 21 or 22. Those four years are a time of incredible intellectual growth and social development. We want our students to learn to write well, read clearly and deeply, have quantitative knowledge, and understand cultures. We want them to learn to solve problems. We also want them to leave as leaders.

Outside the classroom, students learn by living on their own with peers for the first time — maybe they run a program or an event. For many students, this is the only time in life when they will do this. If they go back to school later, it’s for a graduate or a professional degree, and the setting is very different. They are living alone, or maybe married with a family, or maybe they have a job. Often, it is only in the first couple of years of college that students can learn without concentrating on anything in particular.

Many students who take advantage of learning both inside and outside the classroom have a life-changing experience at Washington University. That’s why they say, “This meant so much to me,” and “I remember such and such,” and “There’s professor so-and-so.” To me, this is the point of our education.

There is a lot of public conversation about the elite, private, residential college. To me, one of the things that makes Washington University distinct is the number of professional bachelor’s degrees that we offer outside the Bachelor of Arts. Could we leverage that strength? Do you see a way we could use that to respond to national concerns about the value of a liberal arts education?

Students are under a lot of pressure because of the lack of jobs or the perceived lack of jobs. Parents worry, too. They think their children should take accounting or a computer course for the sole purpose of getting some professional training. I think we should continue to make a very clear case...
It is true that some of our best teachers are not on the tenure track and that research makes a variety of demands on faculty. So what’s the balance? It has to be worked out department by department, with an eye to the larger goal of maintaining teaching and research quality. Let’s take Chemistry, which I know best. A recurring question has been whether we should hire somebody who’s really good at freshman chemistry and does nothing else. We have always said no, because we have good freshman chemistry teachers. But that argument doesn’t work as well for the labs, and now we have non-tenure track people running them. I think that’s a pretty good compromise.

In the case of the languages, the problem is that faculty want to teach upper-level literature instead of basic language. I think we need to have really good senior faculty who are proud to teach freshmen. And then other faculty will say, “Well, if he or she does it, I’ve got to do it, too.”

You are advocating setting community standards and having role models. What do we do about the tenured-track person who is a spectacular teacher but hasn’t quite made the bar on the research?

They don’t make it. That’s why I think we need another place for the best of those people and for the ones who are really, really good on the research side, but not as good at teaching. But we don’t have a system for that.

I know that the provost interacts with undergraduates through the Undergraduate Council and the Student Union. Are there other venues where you interact with undergraduates?

No. It’s something I miss from my earlier days. If the students want somebody who represents the university, they pick the chancellor. In fact, that’s the only person they know.

I do interact with the Rodriguez scholars. We used to have them to our home every year. I always barbecued chicken, and I’d be out there at the grill. We stopped when the group got too big. But I loved doing it, and it seemed to make a difference to these students.

What have you learned from students that has affected your job?

They know what’s what. They have the view on the ground, which is always valuable. Their choices inform a lot of what we do, and their perspectives are helpful.

And what do they want from you when you interact with them?

Not much. They were excited that I increased the time between classes from seven minutes to ten minutes. And I thought, “Right, that was one of my greatest successes.”

Let me say one thing just generally about the provost. It’s always about working through other people. I feel as if I’m succeeding if our leaders succeed. The trick is to figure out how to make our leaders better so the students rely on them. It’s not a very good system if the provost does a lot of things firsthand because he or she doesn’t have any troops.
We are working on new models for students to study the most pressing problems of our society. These issues change over time. We may want to make a short-term investment in a particular topic, but not necessarily hire tenure-track faculty to support it. Staying flexible from a curricular standpoint seems almost incompatible with the idea of tenure faculty. How do we resolve this?

It is an issue. We’ve talked about climate change as a pressing and interesting problem for students to study. Cybersecurity is another. You don’t make a major out of either of these. But it’s pretty important and timely for students to know about them. We ought to bring in people to lead things like that occasionally.

We could also bring in a really successful person who has invested something, maybe in chemistry, physics, or computing. This person could spend a couple of years as a visiting inventor and teach. We should have a group that thinks about these things all the time, not just approving courses, but assessing what we are missing. Then we might come up with solutions.

It seems like our course offerings are fundamentally faculty-driven. Someone gets hired, and we say, “What are you interested in teaching? Our curriculum requires this course, so we’re going to need you to pick it up, and then you can choose whatever else you want.”

There’s rarely a discussion about what the larger community needs. It depends. Sometimes we are perfectly set up. Take your own department. If we were just geology, we wouldn’t have anybody to study Mars or whatever the hottest topic in outer space is. But we have good faculty who work in this area. Whether we offer these courses to non-Earth and planetary science majors is another story. But there are interdisciplinary areas that don’t always fit nicely into a single department. That’s where we need to do some thinking.

Our students talk about the “Wash U bubble,” even though we try to get them into the community more and more. How do we get students more rooted in St. Louis, not just on campus?

We should build on existing strengths. One of those is the Institute for School Partnerships, run by Vicki May. The Gephardt Institute for Public Service also has specific alliances where students can get involved. So does our Community Service Office. We can have better community impact if we work in an organized way. When we let students go out on their own, they eventually graduate or lose interest.

Community-based teaching and learning explicitly bridge academic and service experiences. I think this kind of work should be part of the Washington University experience. If we had a more unified view of the university, we could identify this idea of work in the community as part of our basic identity. 

My sense is that we don’t bring St. Louis City students onto campus much. Some of our peers do a better job. For example, Posse is an organization that identifies groups of eight to ten students, all from the same city, who are interested in a particular university. The students have to pass a series of exams and interviews to get in, and they’re accepted as a unit. They go through four years in the college as a group, and they have a faculty mentor. It’s a big investment, but Posse members’ graduation rates are above university averages. They tend to be spectacular scholars, and they are people whom you probably wouldn’t have known about without the program. Northwestern just signed on with Posse in Chicago. I see it more in the liberal arts colleges. We probably haven’t thought enough about this. We do a few things that are relevant, I think. For example, the German department hosts German Day for anybody who is taking German anywhere in the St. Louis area. I think it includes grade school through high school, and it is motivated by a desire to attract students who want to study German.

Whatever we choose to do has to fit us. Remember at one point the community said it needed more middle school math teachers. I went to the math department and said, “ Couldn’t we put something together to help train math teachers?” The math department was very serious about it; they had done something like this before my time. But they came back to me and said, “The truth is that we can’t teach people to be good middle school math teachers. We don’t have any particular skills. If you wanted to get people to be pre-calculus teachers, we could help a lot.” But in this case, the faculty just didn’t feel qualified. It’s got to fit our abilities. There are plenty of things that do.

Half of our incoming class is pre-med. That percentage has been climbing steadily for decades now, as I understand it. Is that a good thing? Is that something we should try to manage?

I think it is a good thing. I am not sure how one would manage it. We take very good students. Many of them want to be pre-med probably because they’re thinking about some sort of health care career. If we say we won’t let them do pre-med, then we’ll have to take some other students. The pre-med number will always be high because we have an outstanding medical school. But it could drop from where it is now in the future. And if students say they want to do something else, we should take them and support that instead.

But here is the fundamental problem. You’ve got good high school students. They take math, they take chemistry, they take biology, they take physics. Then they take English, and they take history. They do well in all of them. So how do we pick out the ones we want in a way that aligns with what we want to teach? I think we just take the ones who are very talented across the board and hope they sort themselves out once they arrive. I think the challenge for us is to do better and better at teaching those students. I want them to get an education that’s really good on its own terms, whether they go to medical school or not.
These are challenging times for higher education. We are competing with online courses and for-profit educational programs, and the media have written a lot about the cost versus the benefit of a university education. These are disruptive forces to those of us who haven’t been in higher education for as long as you have. How disruptive are they?

I think I’d rephrase your question: “What is it that keeps us going so well?” That seems to be the first question we ought to answer. We can certainly say that we have an excellent faculty and provide close interactions between students and faculty, that you only get in the top 50 to 100 schools — brand-name places where there are many advantages in what your classroom looks like, what your professor is paid, and what your housing is like.

In a recent *New York Times* commentary, Tom Friedman wrote that what you know is less important than what you do with what you know. We have so much information at our fingertips online, with Google, etc. But how do we use it?

Access to information might mean that an employer or a graduate school might accept someone with a certificate who knows the subject thoroughly. We accept it already, to some extent. We take advanced placement for high school students. And under the right circumstances, a person can get into graduate school without earning a college degree. If this kind of practice becomes common, it will be a big threat because we have invested so much in offering a high-quality residential infrastructure. But if we take it seriously now, I think our actions will help us, regardless of the end point.

Recently, I participated in the Harvard-MIT conference on Online Learning and the Future of Residential Education. About 175 people — presidents, provosts, faculty — attended. We talked about pedagogy, learning, and teaching. Three years ago, this would not have been the discussion. We would have been talking about new ideas in research. This is a huge change.

---

**Marion G. Crain**
Vice Provost
Wiley B. Rutledge Professor of Law
Director, Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Work and Social Capital
In addition to playing ball with online courses, it sounds as if there might be room for changes on the academic side. But the pace of change in academia can be glacial, and innovating academic course work can be difficult. Do you have thoughts about how we might move the ice flow along?

I think the biggest problem is getting faculty to believe in this and try it. It’s fine to pay faculty to try teaching online as an overload for a few courses. But I also think we should seed some people in Coursera, one of the organizations that is managing massive open online courses (MOOCs). I think some faculty will fall in love with the idea of reaching tens of thousands of people. The Harvard School of Public Health offers a course team-taught by computer and demography faculty. The professors get letters from public health workers in India saying how important the course is to them. Fifty-five thousand people have signed up. Penn is doing some really interesting things; so are MIT and Stanford. My hope is that Washington University will try a few of these experiments, which will build some momentum for us.

Wash U has long been known for its great undergraduate education, as a place where undergraduates can select the school and a major right from the get-go. For a lot of students, this has real appeal. Should we continue in that vein? Is every tub on its own bottom one of Wash U’s strengths?

First, the second-largest major identified by our entering students is “undecided.” While we do have a lot of students who think they know what they want to do, many don’t know. Second, many of our students who think they know what they want to do change their minds once or even multiple times. We have made it fairly easy for students to move around, but we have some hidden barriers. Because our individual school and departmental cultures are so independent, sometimes students don’t feel comfortable trying things in new areas. I think it would be healthier intellectually if there were fewer boundaries when students begin their studies.

Of course, making changes in that direction seems threatening to some. It may seem like we are dumbing down the current curricular path because we have to give up a bit of depth and maybe some requirements to give students more space to explore. One thing to consider is whether we use technology to cover more information in each course that we offer. Many people recommend that we not do this, but use technology to go for more depth of understanding. I think the same idea applies to majors and other degrees. We’ve pushed more and more information into them. Maybe we can back off a little from that and give students more room to explore.
Is the primary justification for reducing barriers between the colleges and departments so that students can have more academic choice and take a broader array of courses? How is that a better education?

I believe that students starting college should be challenged in ways they never were in high school. This would mean new kinds of courses—not necessarily too many of them, though. If I plan to be a chemistry major and I’ve done really well in high school science and math, maybe I should be challenged with a sculpture course. It would be good for me to figure out how to use my hands in a new way or how to use my eyes in a new way. I know that taking philosophy courses have helped shape me in my own career. The beginning of college matters. When you walk in the door, you ought to have a whole world open up to you for a while.

Won’t that fly in the face of accreditation requirements in some schools, particularly engineering, art, and architecture?

Accreditation makes more rules. For us, this means preserving the status quo. If our status as one of the country’s top universities is to be of any use, we ought to be able to say, “We’re going to do it this way, and we’ll show you why our graduates are really good.”

One of the things we do best is our residential life—both the physical setting and the programming. Is that a logical point of entry for the unifying intellectual experience?

Jill Stratton, our associate dean of students, feels we should run a common academic experience through the Office of Residential Life. And since freshman housing mixes students from different schools and disciplines, this would be a nice way to do it. On students’ own turf, too.

But it sounds like it’s not a place to finish, from your perspective. I sense some longing for the academic side to be doing more than it is.

I would like it if each dean or faculty member who goes out to sell his or her school or program could sell the rest of the university just as well. If we all shared that knowledge and pride for Washington University, that would be the end game. We need to be thinking about ourselves as one university. If the idea of a unified university is my idea, it will never make it. If someone comes up to me and says, “Ed, we’ve come up with this phenomenal idea, and we’re going to push forward whether you like it or not,” then we’ve won.

Do you have any thoughts about how we should get there?

I think the only way to do it is to keep talking to each other. What we need is mutual respect at the student, faculty, and administrative level. And the only way I know is to have people work on things together. One problem is that people don’t step out of their own space very much.

Looking back over your long career at Wash U, what achievement are you most proud of?

All the people I have worked with and seen grow. I have always felt that the purpose of my job is to help others achieve their goals. If they succeed, then I can celebrate in their success.

You know, every time you have a graduate student, that student goes through the PhD program and reaches a point when he or she starts treating you, the faculty advisor, differently. They think they’re smarter than you are. As soon as that happens, you know they’re ready to go out there. They’ve been working so hard, they know more than you do about a particular subject or issue—they’ve got all the answers, and that is success.

I want you guys to go out and do all that stuff. You’ll do it better than I would.

That is why we will miss you, Ed. Your answer to that question defines your leadership: facilitating, nurturing, and bringing others along.
Ed, how has the university’s approach to community engagement changed in the last 30 years?

I’d go back further. Prior to the Second World War, Washington University was a commuter campus critically important to the city. The vast majority of leaders in St. Louis were educated at Wash U and the vast majority of our alumni lived here. After the Second World War, Arthur Holly Compton and others started making this a national university. In 1960, they built the dorms on the South 40, which allowed them to recruit a national student body. By 1970, national recruitment was under way, and it just kept growing. We went from 90% of our undergraduates being from the St. Louis region to only 10% today.

Thirty years ago, I think people perceived us as turning our backs on St. Louis, which was not our intent. Two things were happening for us: 1) We were becoming much more research-oriented, which meant that our reach had to be more than local, and 2) our student body was more geographically dispersed. In fact, we are now one of the most geographically diverse schools in the country, partly because we’re right in the center. Approximately two-thirds of our incoming freshmen come from at least 500 miles away.

I think we had to wake up to the fact that the city felt as if we had changed, even though St. Louis was and is very important to us. In those days, I think it was pretty common for cities to think their local universities had stopped paying attention.

We started making a real effort to change this perception. As a strong member of the community, Bill Danforth always understood the importance of our relationship with St. Louis. He worked very hard at it. Over time, I think
faculty and staff started to believe in it. And Mark Wrighton certainly knows how important it is to be connected. While we take fewer students from the St. Louis area than we used to, we do recruit hard in St. Louis high schools. We try to take their best students.

Now we seem to have new energy. The faculty and administration have a lot of enthusiasm for doing more with the community. Although there are fewer alumni in St. Louis and fewer city leaders educated at Washington U today, I think our investment in the community is consistent with 30 years ago. Students and faculty still want to work in the community. It is up to us to take advantage of this interest.

Some have said that our community engagement during the Danforth era was about a thousand flowers blooming. Over the last ten years, under your and Mark’s leadership, the university has used its resources to go deeper in particular areas in the community where we can really move the needle.

I know that one of your passions has been urban education. Can you say what you think the proper role of the university should be in urban education and the kind of legacy you hope we leave?

Let me start by telling you what I think doesn’t work well. I remember that, some time in the ’90s, one of our social work graduates started a program at one of the St. Louis schools. She got a lot of students to help, and it was great. But she left to become a Rhodes Scholar. Her program fell apart, and, as a result, the community was unhappy with us. This incident was an eye-opener for me. It became clear that we needed to be long-term partners in our work in the community.

Another person who really pushed the idea of long-term partnership was Jim Wertsch. When he joined the education department, he said, “We have all of these programs, but if they are not hooked to something academic, they’re going to fall apart.” He wanted to have courses related to the efforts, but with just one or two schools in the community. Over time, I think we’ve begun to understand how important this is. Boston University tried to improve the schools in a community outside of Boston, and it didn’t work very well. They are a big university with a large education program, and they couldn’t do it. We’re a smaller school with a smaller education department.

What we can do is work on curriculum. In science, Sally Elgin and Vicki May have both been leaders. We have changed our own science curriculum by way of example and then extended this work to some schools in the community. We can train teachers, as Vicki and Barbara Schaal have done, allowing teachers to get a master’s in science education. I don’t think we can swoop in and change the schools. We have to partner with them. But we can’t partner with all of them; there are too many.

You don’t want to stop people from exploring their own ideas, of course. If a faculty member has a good idea, you want to let him or her do it. The Gephardt Institute for Public Service has made a huge difference because now there is a central place for faculty who want information on community projects or want to make a connection in the community.

In my role at the Brown School and through my work at the Gephardt Institute, I have seen a change in the junior faculty, particularly faculty at Brown. Faculty who are starting their careers are educated differently from more senior faculty. Junior faculty expect that their research, teaching, and service will be knitted together in some way. They connect a project in the community, where they are doing research or clinical work, with a course they are teaching. They might be serving on a board that is also connected to the subject area. There is a kind of efficiency in this way of working, and this approach to scholarship gives them an opportunity to go deeper.

When you consider our university’s tenure and promotion guidelines, what would you say to the next provost about balancing faculty interests and demand with succeeding against our current standards?

I think we have to be realistic. Tenure is decided by academic peers. Academic peers tend to come from a more senior cohort—people who were educated earlier. They tend to be focused on research first, teaching second, and service third. I think we have made it clear that we will not accept bad teaching, but we have not had much discussion about service as a part that really counts.

Amanda, your research and service are inexorably linked. But suppose I’m a chemistry professor, and I say, “I’m going to keep working on whatever I do in my research, and then I’d be really interested in going into the schools and working with the science program.” That kind of connection between research and service isn’t as deep. I don’t think it is possible to make those connections consistently tight for everyone. But even in our tenure system, if there is a way we could make service stronger. If we asked faculty to tell us about their service as an active part of every tenure dossier, then I think we’d start to get at it. But we have to go beyond saying, “I’m on a national committee for my professional society. And I’ve been on an editorial board, and they’ve asked me to review papers.” We want that, of course, but I am suggesting that we ask more about their service in the community.

We did the same thing with teaching in Arts & Sciences. We insisted on a teaching portfolio where you have to explain what you’re trying to accomplish and provide courses, the syllabi, and the number of students. In the old days, we never asked faculty anything about teaching. Now people know that teaching is important. If a person doesn’t have any examples of community service, you would deal with it. But for people who want to do it and have done it well, it should be valued.

Every time I go by Flynn Park Elementary School in University City, I see that new playground. Jeff Zachs and some other faculty helped make that playground happen. Jeff did it because he lives in University City and has kids. I agreed to contribute, but it was his time and effort. That type of service is hugely important to our community, and it won’t count toward tenure. But the people in University City care.
What's the role of the provost in guiding leadership development?

Few of us have had management classes. How should we develop faculty leaders, and what supports should be available as we progress?

One of my biggest worries is that there aren't enough talented leaders to run universities. Many of the same people are called on for everything within the university. The number of people who are both willing and skilled is small. At the same time, I think the universities that run best are led by people who start out as regular faculty members. It's a bit like how we want the students who work in the admissions office to be our own undergraduates, so they understand what it's like to live and study here. We have to find a way to give those faculty opportunities and help them grow. I set up the Faculty Fellows program in the provost's office, which is a way to identify potential leaders at an early stage and give them special projects. They learn a lot just by doing.

Adrienne Davis has also organized a lot of programming for faculty interested in leadership. It's become more common for us. But I think we've just scratched the surface.

Staff leadership is also critical. Two years ago, we launched a program called PLAN (Professional Leadership Academy & Network) to develop more leaders on the administrative side. Three of our staff leaders—Gail Oltmanns, Julia Macias Garcia, and Shelley Milligan—came up with the idea, which has been a big success.

We have worked on developing interdisciplinary efforts in the form of centers and institutes in recent years. What activities do you think have the potential for setting Washington University apart from its peers?

There aren't many unique ideas in the academic world. There are other efforts in religion and politics, for example. But we have developed our Danforth Center for Religion and Politics in a new way. There are institutes like our Gephardt Institute at other universities, too, but, again, those centers are not set up like ours.

I think the trick is twofold: 1) We must have good ideas, even if they are not original, and 2) we have to find a way to make the idea fit us. The second part is harder. Right now, our university-wide initiatives don't quite fit because we are so school-oriented. If we set up a center for political economy, it tends to be connected to economics and political science. One department is likely to lead it; it fits within Arts & Sciences, it is funded there, and it works with good leadership. But if we do the same thing for a larger issue that goes across schools, it is much more difficult. It doesn't fit our culture.

The provost's office has to nurture these kinds of ideas to make them work. Cross-school initiatives are going to be very important for universities. We need to break down some of our typical school-based barriers.
Ed, as you probably know, the University of Denver just hired Steve Hayward, a noted conservative writer, as its first visiting scholar of conservatism. The lack of ideological diversity among the faculty was one of the main reasons for the hire. Do you think that universities need to seek out ideological diversity? Is this a legitimate aim?

When the Michigan affirmative action case was almost over, we sent out a note to the university community saying that we were sticking with our policies on affirmative action. There were very few responses, but the few that I remember were about how we don’t care about ideological diversity. “Where are the conservatives?,” they asked. I remember thinking that this must be pretty important to you if you go to the trouble to write.

I think we’ll have a hard time hiring with the logic of diversifying in that way. We want faculty to be able to teach from whatever perspective they believe is appropriate, which may or may not be what they believe. For example, we have a Catholic Studies professor who’s not Catholic.

Denver may have a good person, but I don’t know how you follow that idea over time. I am not confident that institutionalizing it will work well.

I’d like to follow up with diversity on another track. What do you see as the future of ethnic studies here at Washington University? Do you see more proliferation with the possible emergence of Asian-American Studies or Latino Studies?

Typically, these programs start below critical size, and it’s hard to get them going. I remember there was a time when our students were concerned because the English department didn’t have anyone teaching Asian-American literature. I remember the English department wanted a whole Asian-American curriculum. I think we should try to encourage more breadth in ethnic studies. But I worry about very small units that don’t have enough to offer a full major or a regular set of courses.
One reason we took all of the area studies programs and put them in the International and Area Studies (IAS) program was to give them an umbrella and some core courses that everybody took. This allows some flexibility – other courses could come and go. But most of these smaller groups want to be independent. Asian Studies never wanted to be part of IAS because they were one of the larger area studies programs, and they felt they could handle it alone. The compromise was the undergraduate program moved to IAS, while the graduate program stood alone.

I think we should try to grow some things, but it needs to fit the people we have, and the things we want to teach and study. When you were thinking about a center devoted to race, I kept wondering, “Are you going to include about a center devoted to race, I kept wondering, “Are you going to include Hispanics?” I wasn’t sure what we should do. It’s important to start with something strong and at least partially developed, but, once you get the first piece going, others will say, “Now it’s our turn.” If you do that too many times, you don’t have the resources.

That makes sense programmatically, but it seems as if the umbrella idea goes against the very urge that generates these programs, which is identity politics. The sentiment the leadership of these programs expresses is “I don’t want to be part of an umbrella.” These programs want to have their own configuration, to consider identity in their own way.

You’re right. But I think one of our real weaknesses is that the humanities keep trying to subdivide into smaller groups. Subdivision is inevitably a problem because we’re not a very big institution. I think you need half a dozen faculty, minimum, to have a major. And even then, you have to pull things from other areas. If we need half a dozen people in every one of these areas, that’s a lot of people. What do you think?

You’re quite right that the humanities are in an intellectual cell mitosis. When we were doing the provost search, we talked to someone who had the job of checking on the proliferation of these kinds of programs, many of which were in the humanities. His job was to control the rate of increase. I wonder what you think about the idea of having someone hold programs of which were in the humanities. His job was to control the rate of increase. His job was to control the rate of increase. What do you think?

The sentiment the leadership of these programs expresses is “I don’t want to be part of an umbrella.” These programs want to have their own configuration, to consider identity in their own way.

Closing anything is hard. The real question is “Should you start it?” Once started, how do you stop it? If you drop the funding for xyz studies, the people in that area will never forgive you. I think there’s no question we have to focus the right people and starting only the right programs.

I think closing sociology had a fundamental effect on my point of view. It’s better to downsize if we must. It’s better to downsize if we must. I think closing sociology had a fundamental effect on my point of view. It’s better to downsize if we must.
In your experience as provost and dean, do you see any exciting trends in the humanities? Do you see anything that’s going on in humanities that you really feel points to the future?

I always thought the idea of getting students to work on a project as a group was exciting. We received a grant in fall 2009 to help digitize the St. Louis Circuit Court’s historic records. Students could go and delve through the records and contribute to a substantive project. They’d leave, and the next student could take it over, so the work would continue. This was a powerful idea for an undergraduate who wasn’t going to do independent research.

There have been some things like that. Joe Loewenstein has done some of that as he has built the Spenser Archive, which provides scanned images of original editions with markup.

For PhD students in the humanities, there should be something in between the lone person sitting in a library forever and the person who is working on a team.

I also think the humanities should be thinking about outputs. A lot of students want a PhD because they love the material. Maybe they don’t care about a job when they start, but they’re going to need to do something when they finish. For most of them, that will not be a university job. I don’t want to take away from the dissertation, but you could do some things on top of that to make graduates more knowledgeable. Consulting companies hire many different kinds of people. They might love to have a PhD in the humanities, but they are going to have to know how the person will fit. I think it would also buoy the spirits of the faculty to see more of their students getting jobs, as long as they’re willing to accept jobs that are not at research-one universities.

What can a provost do for the humanities?

Was the chemistry department stronger because Mark and I are chemists? I don’t think so. In some ways, there may be an advantage to stand a little above it all and say, “You guys work it out. I’m not a humanist, but I want to help make something happen.” That’s true in any field, I think.
As you know, the university is launching an interdisciplinary journal under the auspices of the provost’s office. It is believed that a journal will give Washington University a higher profile as a thought leader. I want to know what you think of this effort and how a provost can use such an instrument to further his or her own agenda?

Universities are about new ideas and intellectual discourse. A journal ought to expand our visibility in areas where we want to be. The provost needs to know what’s in the journal and talk about it. Not every article in the journal is going to turn heads, but, when good ones show up, you ought to make the most of them. It can change the way we judge and talk about ourselves because it’s not about money — we’re talking about ideas. I think it’s exciting. The hardest part is to make our own people know about it and be proud of it.

I would be careful not to follow the money. That’s not a very good yardstick for the humanities, because there’s so little money flowing in from the government and other sources. So, if you want to judge your faculty by who is getting the biggest grants, the humanities will always lose.

I believe that the two most important pieces for any field are impact on students and quality of scholarship as judged by an external source. The provost should want to know if our humanities work is really having an impact on people. That puts humanities people on an even footing with the scientists, engineers, and medical people. It’s the same for everyone.

I really think that faculty need to be held accountable to something. What you have to do is decide what you’re going to measure and then keep track of it. When I was dean, we had this book, and we kept track of everything we could possibly keep track of. The only problem is that you can only record stuff that you can count. The other problem is categories. For example, articles and papers mean something different than books.

I think the provost needs to understand the people in the humanities on their own terms. Ultimately, I think we have to understand the people in the design field on their own terms, too, and not try to make them all fit one model. The way to do that is to get to know people in the field — in every field that we have.

Is it a legitimate fear that a new, non-humanities provost will look at one humanities scholar and say, "He or she is the model. Everyone should be like this person."

Models aren’t so great for faculty since they tend to do things their own way. I really think that the most critical thing is for the provost to know the faculty and understand what they do, as much as he can. I think it’s especially important to know the new, younger faculty because they always come in with fresh ideas and new ways of operating. If you wait too long, it sort of overtakes you, and you don’t realize things have really changed.

I also want to know who the faculty turn to for mentoring. Who gives them advice? I used to have coffee with all new faculty in their second year. I’d always ask them about it. More often than not, it was the department chair who advised them, not the faculty member down the hall. Those identified leaders can make a huge difference in their fields by encouraging new ideas. I think good chairs do that.
Ed, I want to start with a concept related to your background. How do you think the idea of equilibrium fits into being a provost?

As a chemist, equilibrium is an important concept. Things need to reach equilibrium. But it probably works better with atoms and molecules than with people.

You need equilibrium to be a provost or any leader of faculty in a university setting. You’ve got to have patience, and you can’t take things personally. When people get angry, they’re usually not angry at you, but just upset by something that affects them negatively. When it’s over, you’ve got to let it be. If you sit and think of all of those things at home at night, it will just eat you alive. That’s not to say that you don’t wake up in the middle of the night, thinking of something that didn’t go right or wishing you could have done this or that differently. Of course that happens. But you have to let it go. That’s a kind of personal equilibrium.

It’s also important to realize that the university has a certain equilibrium. The institution is so complicated that, while you want one thing, somebody else wants the opposite. You have to talk a long time to work things out. That’s what people don’t tend to understand. You have to let everyone get their likes and dislikes on the table. Then people start disagreeing with each other and eventually come to what amounts to an equilibrium, or at least something you can pass.

On the personal side, I also wonder if swimming has anything to do with your equilibrium. You have amazing energy, and you seem to take care of yourself.

It is true that provosts need a lot of energy. It doesn’t have to come from exercise, though. I remember meeting a provost at Kansas who meditated. He said, “I sometimes spend five minutes meditating before I go into what might be a difficult meeting. And then I’m refreshed.” I like that, but it’s not my style. Swimming, biking, and having a life outside of the office are pretty important to me.
I'm interested in this idea of institutional equilibrium. You have the perspective of a long tenure here, and you have seen the institution through a lot of change. In the last several years of your tenure, you have been managing larger cultural change, it seems to me. Can you talk about how your kind of institutional knowledge is culminating now, at the same time when some critical change seems to be afoot for us?

I have an institutional memory that is longer than almost anybody's in the administration, but that’s also a little bit dangerous. I have to be careful not to tell everybody the history all the time because people will say, “That’s so long ago. Who cares? It’s today, and our problems are more immediate.”

But now we’ve got some issues that aren’t easily fixed in our decentralized system, partly because things have become more interdisciplinary. We hire faculty who want to work with faculty outside their area, maybe even their school. And we don't have as much money as we used to, which means that we're going to have to become more efficient. I think it's very hard for an institution like ours to make big changes. “Does this really make sense? Could we do more if we cooperated more?”

It's okay to be inefficient, but, at some point, you have to ask yourself, “How can we be the most inefficient way you can run a university to decentralize everything. It's okay to be inefficient, but, at some point, you have to ask yourself, "Does this really make sense? Could we do more if we cooperated more?"

I think it's very hard for an institution like ours to make big changes. If we were in a crisis, we'd have to change. Places like Tulane had probably already planned for change. Katrina just gave them their reason. We don’t want a crisis, which allowed them to make changes. Tulane had probably already planned for change. Katrina just gave them their reason. We don't want a crisis, which allowed them to make changes. Tulane had probably already planned for change. Katrina just gave them their reason. We don't want a crisis, which allowed them to make changes.

What is your relationship to peer institutions, and how does that bring new perspective to the university?

I have close colleagues who are part of a group of 12 private research universities. I know these people well, and we are very honest with each other. I learn so much from them. One of the provosts will say, “We've got a faculty issue, and we've got to do something.” I might say, “Hey, we've got the same issue.” Those conversations have been very important to me over the years. It's a little bit like having history, though. You can't tell somebody here, “Duke does it this way, so we should, too.”

But it's good to know that other places are dealing with the same issues. What worries me most is when I find out that other institutions fix problems that we share before we do. Sometimes that’s because they’re more centralized, and sometimes it’s because they raised the issue earlier and worked on it.

I wanted to turn this to MIT. I just returned from the conference for the Alliance for the Arts in Research Universities. A historian talked about MIT’s foundation in science, technology, and design with an emphasis on projects and experimentation and making things — similar to what we do in a studio art. Do you think your education in chemistry drives your willingness to test things? Is that a foundation from MIT?

MIT was my kind of place, but my interest in this goes back further. Scientists and artists are probably very similar. As a kid, I always wanted to play with a chemistry set, look at things and touch them, and try to fix them. I think it was learning how something worked. I wanted to experiment and make something. I wasn’t making art — that’s for sure. But I can remember taking a box and using pins to build a control panel for a fancy machine. I drew in the dials. I just wanted to know what the control panel would be like. I’m very keen on people trying things.

As a provost or dean, I always think you should go with your people. If someone has a good idea, you ought to find a way to encourage them. Even if it sounds somewhat screwy, give them a shot at it if they’re good. They know stuff that I don’t know, and they might make it work.

For example, Wayne Fields had this idea for American Culture Studies. Gerald Early had a slightly different idea. I remember saying to Gerald, “I think it’s very hard for an institution like ours to make big changes. If we were in a crisis, we’d have to change. Places like Tulane had probably already planned for change. Katrina just gave them their reason. We don’t want a crisis, which allowed them to make changes.”

“Do you think Wayne’s idea is a good one?” And Gerald said, “He’s been talking a long time about it. I don’t think I completely understand it, but I’m sure Wayne can make it work.” So we went with it and, of course, he did make it work. You need to have a belief in people. You’ve got to be willing to try things that you don’t fully understand.

Can you tell us about your staff and your process of working with them?

I’ve always thought that everyone on my staff should know as much about everything as they possibly can. When I was dean of Arts & Sciences, this was a lot of people. It took me time to figure out that everyone should have close to equal access. Over time, I tried to make it clear that nothing was out of bounds and that I didn’t have the answers to everything. There were confidential issues, of course, but there weren’t lots of secrets. And I think that worked very well. I think people felt empowered, like they ran the place, too.

In the provost’s office, I have a much smaller staff. When I started, I wanted to be sure that I had regular faculty input, so I set up the Faculty Fellows program. Again I tried to be as open as I could. The Fellows give me insights and get involved in projects. I have found that incredibly helpful; I think it helps them, too. We’ve had a lot of good people involved.

I try to meet with the people assigned to this office and a few others on a regular basis. If you don’t tell them anything, they can’t help you come up with ideas. But when you make people feel as if they’re part of the process, they do wonderful things.

That goes back to my view of the fundamental idea of provost. The provost has to be careful not to be in the spotlight, even more than the dean. It’s not like running a school, or having a faculty or a curriculum. The trick is to make others successful rather than worrying about whether I get credit. It’s a little different as a dean because the faculty and the students look to the dean as a sort of personification of a school. Nobody looks at the provost that way.
Ed, you're a decision maker. You tend to weigh things up front, but then you stick to your decisions. You seem to do it with a kind of ease. Can you talk about the weight of decision making and how you came to be so good at it?

Some comes naturally, and some of it doesn't. I can remember talking to Jim McLeod when I was first dean of Arts & Sciences. I said, “So how do we decide that, Jim?” He said, “Ed, you're the dean. Just say something, and it will happen.” And it did. I remember thinking, “I've got to be careful that the decision is right and that people won't be upset,” but it doesn't always work that way. And then you have to say, “This is what we're going to do” and stick with it. That takes a while. It's a little scary at first.

But maybe decision making is also in my personality. One thing that annoys me is when I make a decision and then a group comes back a day later or a week later and says, “Let's revisit this.” I usually respond with, “No, I already told you what we're going to do. I'm not changing my mind.”

I think it's ironic that we ended up in these jobs with very little training in leadership and administration. You mentioned Jim McLeod. Who are your mentors, and what are some of the lessons that you have learned?

A provost has a hard time finding somebody to talk to—a dean does, too. When I was dean, I didn't have a provost. I would talk with people whom I trusted and knew well. Jim McLeod was certainly one person. And there were others, including some department chairs, over time—for example, Ralph Quatrano when he was chair of Biology. And Roddy Roediger, whom I hired. Gerhild Williams was always there. At first, there were just a few people. The group has expanded over time. I certainly involve my staff that way.

There's another part to this. How receptive are you to being told that you're wrong? I've always wanted people who feel comfortable telling me that I am wrong. Without that, I think you make all kinds of mistakes. I don't always agree with them at first, but I usually thank them later. That's not quite the same as mentorship, but it's related, I think.

I talk to the deans, too, as you know.

I appreciate those conversations.

You said one thing recently in a deans' meeting that keeps running in my head. “It's always easy to cut out art.” I think everybody in the room understood exactly what you meant. Art on campus is a good example of how hard it is to do new things. In this case, everyone says we've got a beautiful campus already. But wait until we have some art and then people will say, “Wow, it's so much better.”

We have thought a lot about how art can add diversity to the campus and present different perspectives.

It's one of the things you said to the Brown School when you began to look at Native American artists for their new building. I think you are right.

So what's your advice for Holden?

He is a very talented guy who doesn't need advice from me. But if he asked, “What do you think the most important issues are?”, I would say many of the things that we have already discussed. You've got to bring the deans together and encourage them to collaborate. In our system, deans have so much independence that no one person will take on, such as diversity.

Meanwhile, the idea of unifying some aspects of the undergraduate curriculum as well as supporting some of our joint research units is important. Just today, the two heads of the Division of Biology and Biomedical Sciences visited me. They wanted to talk about how the division doesn't fit anywhere on campus. It's a big and cross-disciplinary. It's largely in the medical school, but there are people in Engineering and Arts & Sciences as well. They wonder how to raise money, and they want a spokesperson. The right spokespersons are deans, but the provost needs to be behind it because it's a university-wide thing, not just one school.

Beyond that, I think Holden will have his own ideas. He's got to follow his own nose.

Let me come back to one thing. You started this conversation with equilibrium, swimming, and navigation. Here's a story about my less-than-perfect navigation. When I swam Alcatraz a few years ago, they took about 400 of us a mile and a half and a half out on a ferry. You swim in. The reason you can do it is because you drop yourself off when the tides are changing, so there's not much current. It takes awhile and, as you swim along, the tide picks up and pulls you out toward the Golden Gate Bridge. You have to make a very narrow entry into the harbor. If you miss it, there is a great big rock thing. So I'm swimming along. When you're in these waves, you're looking up and down, and it's hard to see. They have some people in kayaks in case you're going to drown. At one point, I asked one of the guys, “Do you think I should turn in here?” He said, “No, no, keep going.” I should have turned in there, as I soon realized. But I kept going, and I ended up swimming like hell just to try to get back against the current so I could get into the harbor.

That story reminds me that you are tenacious and a risk taker. And I think you make people comfortable being part of your team.

Thank you.
Ed, what do you see as the big threats to Washington University as you look out ten years?

I think the general threat is standing still—getting too comfortable with the fact that we’re doing well. I think the university has done well over time because it always wanted to be better. It’s an advantage of not being number one. But we’ve reached a pretty good position, and we may be getting a bit complacent.

Another worry is money. Whenever the government starts cutting, we are affected. We go through these cycles. But the particular cycle we’re in right now looks difficult because, even if the economy starts growing, there will likely be more bifurcation between rich and poor. We want students from different economic groups to get a college education, and to go on to graduate and professional schools. It’s going to be harder to attract low-income students unless we have a lot more money for scholarships. On the graduate and professional side, money now seems like a crucial issue. Will an institution like ours be able to fund what it really needs to do next?

And there’s the issue of people. We can never have enough people who work for institutional good above personal good. Everybody is a free agent and could take off to the Dodgers if they got the right deal. That’s good in some ways, but it’s hard on the institution unless some people are willing to say, “All right, I’ll take a hit on that because I want to make this place better.” We’ve been fortunate to have those people, but the risk is always out there.

The fourth threat is easy. How will online education and new technologies change us? We need to keep experimenting so that when somebody figures out how to do this right, we’re in the mix. I think students will expect it.

“De[centralize]?"
The personal touch also signals the flavor of the place, I think.

Another characteristic is having a real view of the importance of a field for the university. Carmon Colangelo has that, and it’s worth a lot. He really believes that the institution should incorporate the arts and design into everything we do, and he’s had some success in getting us to do more.

Eddie Lawlor is another example, but in a different way. He is bridging social work to many things — in the community, but also in medicine through the Institute for Public Health. A dean needs a real belief in what he or she is advocating — the thing that makes the school important.

Deans also need to be able to look at numbers and figure out what’s going on — evaluate a pitch that’s being made for something. If it’s a good case, back it up. If it’s not a good case, explain why.

What are some lessons from deans who have struggled that might be useful to articulate?

A dean with vision is great. But if the vision isn’t matched by action, then ultimately the dean fails. Faculty, students, donors, and staff all want to see the action. If the dean can’t describe the programs that support the vision, then people lose confidence.

Is that because the vision is too broad?

It can be. Suppose you told me that our campus isn’t set up well. You know, it’s upside down, we’re going to have to redo it. I’d say, “Okay, great. Some of these buildings are really old. What’s the first project?” If you can’t answer that question, then we’ve got a problem. There are a lot of good ideas in the university. But not all of them work.

If you could start with a clean slate, would you make the university less decentralized?

This is what I think about all the time. I think there are a lot of strengths in decentralization because you’re putting more responsibility in the people who know what’s going on. But we’ve taken it pretty far. And it makes it harder to get people to cooperate. They will cooperate on a lot of things because each group has its own money, so they figure, “I’ll come to the table with something and, if it’s worth it, I’ll do it.” However, every new idea is judged by who wins and who loses financially, since everyone has their own pots of money. That makes it very hard to change.

If I were to start over, I would centralize the undergraduate experience more. I would enroll all undergraduates together and give them an experience that tells them that they are part of Washington University — not just a school. I think that would require giving up some of our decentralization, which is a very difficult concept for us.

That last one seems critical. Rather than thinking about online as a substitute for the classroom, it’s a question of how it can enhance what we already do.

There are many ways for us to do better. It isn’t fancy headline stuff, but some of the basics. Think about places in graduate education where we don’t have a full faculty contingent. If we could start sharing courses and lectures, that would help. Our Schools of Engineering and Medicine are already working with MIT and the University of Illinois on some courses. And they do it with faculty lectures — students are in a room with a big screen so everyone can see each other. It’s a lot of work to test all of this out, but we may find ways that really enhance what we do.

In some ways, Washington University isn’t ready for this kind of collaboration because we are missing some basic infrastructure. For example, we don’t have the right technology capacity in most of our facilities.

Washington University has seen incredible success over the last 25 years. What’s your short version of the history that explains that success, other than Provost Ed?

I do think it’s partly that we always want to be better. And we’ve had terrific leaders. When Arthur Compton came in after the Second World War, he really turned the place around. The university began to focus on research and the idea of what higher education could be like. But we were still a pretty sleepy place. We didn’t even have dorms until 1960, and Compton was long gone by then.

Bill Danforth came in when we had had the dorms for about a decade and were starting to nationalize the student body. Danforth got money for the university. And I think he got people to believe that we really could be good. Since then, it has been pretty amazing to watch. Mark picked up where Danforth left off and has kept moving us forward.

You’ve watched a lot of deans come and go. If you had to point to a list of attributes that makes an incredible dean, what would you say?

Bob Virgil had a way of hiring faculty that electrified me.

He hired me.

Right. He’d talk about things like “I took the candidate over to the Ritz for dinner, where I had a special T-shirt waiting for him.” Or “the whole family came, and we got teddy bears for the kids.” He would go out of his way. He went to Michigan State and sat in Gary Miller’s office, explaining to him why he had to come. I can just imagine that. Today’s deans will do that, too.
Changing gears a little, what do you see as the role of professional schools on our campus?

If you look at the undergraduate education, it’s what makes us different than, say, Amherst. We have all of these schools, and it’s a very exciting place. That’s one reason why I think it’s important to have some kind of a unified experience that includes the professional schools.

But professional schools are facing hard times right now. The School of Law is going through real challenges. We are fortunate to have Kent Syverud as dean. He is thoughtfully developing new initiatives in online education and across the law school.

I fear business education has some of the same underlying problems. If it costs a lot of money to get a professional degree, and you can’t get a job that has a salary commensurate with the cost of tuition, then you start to worry. What if employers devalue the degree?

In the case of law and architecture, the degrees are licensed, which adds value. But employers can work around that when they need to. The only profession that’s got it figured out, it seems to me, is medicine. In medicine, they’ve restricted the number of MDs so much in this country that we actually have shortages in some places.

Back to this issue about schools owning undergraduate students, I think it’s a mistake to have an 18-year-old come here to spend four years in one school, only venturing out when forced to meet breadth requirements. I keep thinking about something that Stanford did. All students are required to take a design course. If we did that, the course might come from the Sam Fox School, from Engineering, or from Business. We’re telling our students that we want to broaden their view of the world. And actually the professional schools might be the best place to do it.

I’ve written a theory of organization, which is essentially that good firms vacillate over time between being centralized and decentralized. If they’ve been decentralized for a long time, problems emerge related to decentralization. When they centralize, they solve some of those problems, but then all of the problems of centralization come out, which include bureaucracy, lack of autonomy, and incentives to be innovative. And so firms decentralize. It’s in the dynamics of moving back and forth between centralization and decentralization that you actually move ahead as an organization. Our current problems are related to what we can’t create in our decentralized structure, which we’ve had for a long time. On the other hand, if we centralize, we will create some bureaucracy that people will resist.

That makes a lot of sense to me. I think the outside world wants us to be a little more centralized. In graduate education, there are more and more things that cross over schools. There are new programs, new degrees, new areas of study. If you’re too decentralized, you don’t take advantage of those quickly. Places that have more central control can say, “Okay, get together and create a new degree.” In research, I know that’s true. With the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation, there’s a lot of money for cross-disciplinary research. I wonder if we could move in a little. Is it possible to avoid becoming completely centralized?

I think it will be very difficult for us to avoid some movement toward centralization. But, ultimately, this place is likely to remain quite decentralized.

I’ve been paying a lot of attention to the pope lately. Under the right circumstances, the pope speaks with infallibility. That’s what the university needs. Every once in a while, somebody should say, “We’re going to change.” The pope can move his people by speaking ex cathedra. The university leader also needs a way to move us to change.

So the provost should have the authority to command whenever she or he wants, but not use it?

That’s exactly it.
First of all, I want to congratulate you on your outstanding service to Washington University. I am delighted to have this opportunity to interview you. One often hears that surgeons are made, not born. Do you think that is true of provosts?

I don’t know about surgeons, but nobody has had any experience being a provost. You have to learn on the job. In the best cases, the provost was previously a faculty member and ideally a dean. That’s not bad training, but, really, the job is very different. Once you become a provost, you look at deans in a new way. I became provost in 1988; I’d only been a department chair, not a dean. That was an eye-opener. There was no one to teach me what to do.

What are some of the biggest changes that you have seen in the interactions between the Danforth Campus and the Medical Campus over your career? What activities have you championed to promote those interactions?

One of the most important connections we have is the Division of Biology and Biomedical Sciences. It’s the single biggest graduate program, and it’s critically important for both campuses. When Ralph Quatrano was elected to run the division, I thought it was a watershed moment. Until then, the division head had always come from the School of Medicine. It was a huge change. So, what did I have to do with that? I hired Ralph way back when he came into Biology. Does that count?

By the way, every now and then, someone will say, “Why do we have the division?” and others will start ticking off the things that connect the two campuses — seminars, graduate students, courses, research grants. It is the people who want to work with each other who make the difference — undergraduates, graduate students, faculty. We have many undergraduates who conduct research at the medical school. They are probably the largest group going back and forth the two miles between the campuses.
If you had one piece of advice to give to your successor, Holden Thorp, about how he might go about improving the interactions between Danforth and Medical Campuses, what would that be?

Well, Holden knows a lot since his own work overlaps with biomedical research. He already has a foothold. What I always tell people on this campus is to understand that the two missions are different. Our common mission is research and graduate education. But the Danforth Campus has a big undergraduate teaching mission, and the Medical Campus has a big clinical mission. If we respect those differences, it’s much easier to work together.

In the biological and physical sciences, we have massive data sets and many new technologies that are transforming the way we can do science. Do you think we need a major reform in how we are educating our graduate students?

I’d go back a step. Undergraduates need more statistics experience. We should think about statistics much in the way that we think of calculus. At the graduate level, statistics become even more important. I think we have to be more cognizant of the needs.

Recently, we had a computer scientist visit from Fudan University. This guy works on making machines work with big data. He had been at the NSF for a few years, and prior to that he had worked with some Silicon Valley companies. He pointed out that, in the old days, it was all about doing differential equations faster because that resulted in better bombs. Now the big thing is moving data, which is still incredibly slow. Some of our students get it. But a lot of them aren’t really trained for that. I think data management is going to become a way of life, certainly in the biological and biomedical sciences, and in the social sciences, too.

A PhD in the biological sciences is sort of scripted. Our graduate students go into a laboratory, come up with a hypothesis, and then go about testing that hypothesis. Given that many biomedical problems now require multidisciplinary approaches to be solved, I wonder if we want to train our PhDs differently in the future. Do we need to redefine what PhD training is?

CCSN, Computational Cognitive Systems Neuroscience, is a “pathway” program that graduate students in psychology, biomedical engineering, and neuroscience can take. It takes students out of their PhD program for one year and gives them a set of core courses. They also do a project that can be integrated into their dissertation or can be independent. They are trained by an interdisciplinary group of faculty, and they learn something that they otherwise would not have. I bet you could do something similar with big data.
I’m a cancer biologist. Whole genome sequencing has given us a glimpse of the complexity of cancer genomes and provides us with an opportunity to understand its molecular underpinnings. However, the bottleneck is being able to synthesize massive data sets in order to functionalize cancer genomes. That takes skill sets in bioinformatics that I don’t have and my trainees don’t have. To solve important questions, at least in terms of disease and the human body, you need many people with unique skill sets working together.

What makes this hard is that you want different kinds of faculty at the table. The medical school can build a bioinformatics group, but they would be strengthened by biomedical engineering, mathematics, and computer science. All of a sudden, you need to get people to work together, and that’s not easy.

It’s also tricky because of the way graduate students are trained and supported. Most of us fund our students on grants. Their effort has to be devoted to the grant. You want your students to have many experiences, but, at the same time, you’re feeling the pressure of what needs to be accomplished to get the next round of funding. Somehow we have to disconnect from that paradigm.

We all are concerned about NIH funding, sequestration, and health care reform, and how these are negatively impacting the medical school. I look at our faculty. My department alone has the potential to lose half a million dollars in the short term because of sequestration. And that’s a basic science department. It is very demoralizing. What do you see as the short-term and long-term impact on the university as a whole, and the Danforth Campus in particular?

We don’t really know yet, but it looks as if there will be less government money, and more traditional sources are a bit strained. That’s usually a good time to try new things. For example, if we really want to do better with big data, we will need to try something new with our curriculum. Maybe this makes for a better education.

I cannot help but point out that Mark Wrighton, you, and your successor are all chemists. Is there anything about a chemist’s background particularly suited for these leadership positions?

Being a scientist certainly has some advantages. I think scientists who grow up in academia deal with all the things you have to do in a top administrative role. They get grants. They manage money. They work with numbers. They have to explain what they’re doing to others. They manage staff. They have to deal with rejection. But other people can do this, too. There have been lots of good university presidents who weren’t scientists.

That comes back to the question: “Are you born or made?” I believe that there is a unique group of academics who are born, not made, for leadership positions. These individuals are willing to move outside of their domains and get joy out of mentoring others, seeing others succeed, and growing programs. I think that’s innate, not learned.

Of my closest colleagues who are provosts, Dan Linzer at Northwestern is a biologist, Peter Lange at Duke is a political scientist, and Earl Lewis, former provost at Emory, is a historian. Only one is a scientist. So, different kinds of people can do it, but this whole group works well with people and can solve tough problems.

What advice can you give me as I enter into the realm from which you are departing? I soon will be taking on a new position as vice provost of science at The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center.

I think you’re going to be great. Keep pushing good ideas, even when they don’t succeed at first. And roll with the punches. You can’t let it get you down. I’ve had some ideas that never did work, and I now think, “Okay, it just didn’t work. That’s life. Keep going.”
Ed, you started as a faculty member at Washington University in 1970. Did you envision that you would become the maximum academic leader at the university?

No, I certainly did not. As you know, chemists spend a lot of time thinking about research and teaching, and working in the lab. But throughout my life, people have also looked to me to lead. I’m not sure why it happens, but I’ve had the experience of being in a group and someone saying, “Oh Ed, you lead that.” I always agreed to do it and came to enjoy it. When I was in high school and college, I remember that it was sometimes difficult to work with people. But I usually thought, “I learned something from that.” And I was able to apply it later.

Two important things happened along the way. The first was when I was an assistant professor. I was on the curriculum committee in Arts & Sciences, and Burt Wheeler was dean. We wanted to change the general education requirements. I was on the committee for a year, and we were going in circles. Burt was about to retire as dean of the college. They asked me if I would lead the curriculum committee. I resolved that I would lead it for one year, and we would finish it as a gift to Burt. And we did. That made me think there was a possibility for some kind of university leadership for me.

The second experience was a little different. Bob Williams, who was a professor of history and had been dean of University College, wanted to revamp the summer school. He asked me to run it. I did it for a few years. Running summer school is like running the university. You have courses and students and faculty to keep track of. And it was a mess, all written down by hand. This was about 1980, and personal computers had come onto the market. I went to the technology services guys, and they gave me a program called VisiCalc. I put all of our information in this spreadsheet. And then I wrote a report about what we had done. We had a lot of new data that we had never recorded before. I remember that Bill Danforth got a copy of the report. Even today, he remembers that I wrote it.
In point of fact, you emerged as a great leader at a very competitive institution with no formal preparation. Did you ever think you ought to go to Olin Business School and get an MBA?

Maybe I should have. But I never had any trouble with statistics or computer-aided analysis. I suppose I might have learned about dealing with people a little sooner.

You have lived a life in which people look to you for leadership. Does that make you think that leaders are born? Or do you think you can prepare yourself for leadership?

I think it’s a little of both. Good leaders see how to build something that does not currently exist, something for which there may not be a model. And leaders need interpersonal skills. On the other hand, I do think there are things that people can do to become better. When we run PLAN (Professional Leadership Academy & Network) sessions for staff, we help them think about themselves and whether leading is something they’d like to do. I don’t think we really train them to lead.

My biggest worry has been that people who seem like great leaders do something, perhaps chair a complicated committee, and then say, “I don’t want to do this anymore.” And we lose them. That’s happened a few times. I think we need to help them get started and have some success.

Some people with academic leadership responsibility don’t feel rewarded, and choose to resume a full-time research and teaching role. What are the rewards for carrying the mantle of responsibility?

I think the reward is almost completely built into the job itself. If it doesn’t rewarded, and choose to resume a full-time research and teaching role. What are the rewards for carrying the mantle of responsibility?

I think the reward is almost completely built into the job itself. If it doesn’t give you a good feeling to help other people succeed, then no amount of money or title or office really matters. I always worry when people feel they need a reward. I understand why people like to be paid well, and that’s appropriate. But if they’re not getting something out of it personally — some joy that they’ve moved the institution along — then maybe it’s not worth it. I’m not sure you can pay people enough money to work day and night, and worry about everybody else’s problems.

There’s a saying: Your friends come and go, but your enemies always stay with you. How have you managed to thrive in a leadership role for such a long time, where you work with extremely talented people who have very strong views, in many cases? You are wrapping up a truly distinguished career with uniform respect.

It’s hard for me to say. The university has been very good to me. And I have changed the nature of my job over time. I think there was a limit to how long I could have been the chair in Chemistry. Then I became provost, which is a little unusual because I hadn’t been a dean. The year before you arrived, Bill Danforth asked me to be interim dean of Arts & Sciences and retain my role as provost. Being a dean is a completely different kind of leadership.

When you came, we rearranged some of the things that you did and some of the things that I did. After a while, I felt that I had been running to the end of what I could do as dean. And then you said, “Maybe you ought to be provost. Maybe we could change the structure and leave the institution in better shape for our successors, moving us to a more traditional chancellor–provost role.” That seemed very exciting to me — fun to figure out how to do it. It was harder than I expected, but I think we got there. And I found it very satisfying.

Why aren’t people angry at me? I don’t know. I’ve tried to be honest with everyone, even when people haven’t wanted to hear what I have to say. If I need to say, “I don’t think that will work,” then I do. Even if people don’t think I did a great job, at least they know I gave them the straight story.

You touched on honesty — in effect, saying the same thing to different people in pursuit of some objective. What are the other qualities that are important for effective leaders in higher education?

In working with faculty, you need to like the research. It’s important to like what faculty do and want to learn more about it. Michael Sherraden in the Brown School wrote me a note the other day. He said, “Ed, you always wanted to know what we were doing. And you asked questions, and I sent you stuff. That means a lot.”

Academic leaders also face the challenges of resources. How have you gone about deciding how to deploy resources? You’ve done this as a department chair, dean, and provost. How does a good leader evaluate resource allocation?

The first thing is that a leader needs to know the resources. She or he needs to understand the numbers and have done real homework. When someone comes in and asks for something, you need to understand what they want and what it will cost, and what you have to put behind it. I guess my own feeling is that it is essential to follow the best people.

You need a little bit of luck, too. Every once in awhile, something would happen and Jim McLeod would say, “Ed, just take your luck. Just be glad it went that way because it could have gone the opposite.”
You are highly respected within Washington University. But you’ve also garnered respect among your provostial colleagues. You recently ushered in a new initiative, Semester Online. How did you go about getting people at institutions who are competing with us for prestige and visibility to come along with you and help develop Semester Online?

We all knew each other. When the idea of Semester Online emerged, I went to each of them and talked about it. The most interesting thing to me was that all of the schools had similar issues. We worry about faculty governance. How do we get the faculty to accept this idea? When do you have to vote? But we also saw the great advantage of students being able to take a course or two at another institution.

The harder part was coming up with a written contract for all of us to sign, along with the for-profit company that was implementing this idea. That took months and months. It was understood over time that I was the leader of this group. My approach was to keep the other provosts informed of everything. And I had a huge advantage coming from Washington University because we have such a close-working, internal team. I had Tom Blackwell from the general counsel’s office, and Tim Thornton from financial planning, and Lynn McCluskey and Shelley Milligan from this office. Roddy Roediger helped us with faculty issues. Each of them led a group across the institutions working on things like finances, legal implications, registrar issues, and so forth. And we just did it. We didn’t ask. There weren’t any votes. People were happy, I think, because we were completely open.

We listened to everybody’s issues and then tried to come up with an agreement. We signed the original memorandum of understanding in July. And we signed the final master service agreement the following February. It took us eight months. Ultimately, I think everyone trusted each other. It’s a major achievement that requires working with the generals of all the institutions. When you look back on your years as an academic leader, what accomplishments do you think are most important?

I think I am most proud of the people that we’ve nurtured. I look at the improvement of undergraduate admissions through John Berg’s office and also the curriculum. In research, I’m very proud of the fact that we have now brought people together to help us with this person we want to hire.”

Who pays for the lab? Now people request the guidelines and say, “This will help us in the future.” Where does the tenure reside? How do you set up the tenure committee? I used to hate policies, but, in the last few years, I have seen how having a few policies can encourage people to cooperate. The joint professor guidelines are an example of that. Mark Rollins helped develop those when he was a Faculty Fellow. He worked with each dean. We looked at what other universities were doing. Our guidelines address a lot of details—situations with two schools, situations with two departments. Who covers the leave? Where does the tenure reside? How do you set up the tenure committee? Who pays for the lab? Now people request the guidelines and say, “This will help us with this person we want to hire.”

I’m very proud of the fact that we have now brought people together to do things. That used to be harder at Washington University than it is today. I think that will help us in the future. The guidelines are a small piece, but it takes a lot of small pieces to get people to cooperate.

You are going to wrap up as provost on June 30th, just a couple of months from now. What recommendations do you have for Holden Thorp?

I think the most important thing for the provost is that he works seamlessly with the chancellor. The only way is for the chancellor and the provost to communicate a lot and be on the same page. There needs to be a comfortable feeling that you cover for each other. I would say to Holden, “Get to know Mark well, and work together.”

Gentle, good advice for the chancellor, as well as for Holden. You know, when the provost is sitting in a room with a bunch of faculty or deans and something comes up, you have to respond. You don’t want to have to say, “Let me think about it. I’ll talk to Mark.” When you want to say, “Yes, let’s do this, or let’s do it this way,” you want to be comfortable about where the chancellor would come down. For that to work, the provost–chancellor team has to be strong.

The other thing is that the provost has to be able to work with everybody else. That includes all of the people in administration and finance, plus the deans and the faculty. The provost isn’t everybody’s friend, but people need to feel comfortable to go to him with issues, even if the issues don’t fit the provost’s role.

Maybe I can ask one more question. Professor Nancy Morrow-Howell is teaching us that there’s a fourth phase of life when you have your encore career. What are you thinking?

There are things I would like to do in my own life—exercise more, be with my grandchildren. I also want to keep the online education and related technology going in the institution, which is new for everybody and pretty exciting. I can only take it so far myself, but I can encourage others to take over parts of it. For the short term, I see a lot to do. I want to be involved in things. I don’t exactly know what, but I’ll keep being involved.
These interviews have made me reflect on my time at Washington University and on the flow of events that have shaped our institution. I have said so often in these discussions that I think it is the people who make our university great, and they have kept me here. My interviewers are some of those great people and some of my closest colleagues. They asked me questions about leadership, but, in reality, each of them is a leader and someone from whom I have learned.

Through my time as chief academic officer, I have often wondered why it is so hard to make big changes at an excellent institution like ours. Things are going well; morale is high. Yet, we must change if we are going to continue to improve and meet the challenges of the future, not just the present. Perhaps we can learn to be more receptive to major change. That will require strong leadership in the future.

My time as the academic leader of Washington University is now coming to an end, and I want to thank the very many people who have worked with me and helped improve Washington University. I owe a great debt to all of you. I want to give special thanks to Heather Corcoran, Associate Professor of Design, who conceived all aspects of this project as a Faculty Fellow in the provost’s office. She encouraged the interviewers to participate, she attended all interviews, and she designed the final document. Participating in this project is one of the highlights of my career. Thank you, Heather.