Introduction, or How I Almost Managed to Become Someone Else

From 1997 to 2008, I served as dean of the College of Arts and Letters at the University of Notre Dame. One day my staff ushered me into our conference room for one of the brief birthday celebrations they occasionally arranged. I was a bit late. They had waited for me before beginning to sing, and I joined in with full voice, but I quietly paused after a while and whispered to one of my colleagues, “Whose birthday is it?” “Yours,” she said.

With twenty-one departments and more than five hundred faculty members in the college, my identity as dean was overwhelmingly collective, and forgetful immersion in its day-to-day responsibilities had become a way of life.

But I didn’t adjust to the identity of dean immediately. A week or so after I had started, I set up a meeting with our computer technician, Dave Klawiter. “Let’s meet at eight o’clock tomorrow in Harry’s office,” I said. “Harry” was Harry Attridge, who was my predecessor and had since moved to Yale. Dave responded, “Maybe you should start calling it your office.”
When someone would ask where I worked and what I did, for years I simply said that I taught at Notre Dame. Somewhere along the way I made the transition to, “I’m dean of Arts and Letters.” I became the role I was playing.

I served for eleven years, six more than I originally intended. But I had learned that it takes time to make substantive changes, so I stayed longer than I had planned.

In eleven years I made many mistakes. And yet I learned many lessons as well. Experience is fed in part by reflection on mistakes. I hope in this book to help others avoid pitfalls by offering a kind of surrogate narrative experience. But the book is not only about mistakes: It is about intellectual principles in administration and strategies for moving from vision to implementation. It offers an analysis of best practices, with particular stress on the value of distinctive mission. More than twenty-five years ago, Henry Rosovsky, at the time dean of Arts and Sciences at Harvard, published a splendid book called *The University: An Owner’s Manual*. One might think of this book, as one of the readers for the press suggested, as *The Distinctive University: An Operator’s Manual*.

I once heard a president say he had no power. He meant that he could not take any action without strong support from below. What he said is not quite true. Certainly, there are areas where an administrator must and should defer to the faculty. At Ohio State the chairperson never overturned the department after a good and substantive discussion, but he or she had the right to argue persuasively for a given position. A dean tends to defer to the faculty in certain areas as well. The only time I ever even contemplated overturning our legislative body, the College Council, on a curricular matter was when our classics department proposed a classical studies major, in addition to its majors in Greek and Latin, that would require no knowledge of Greek or Latin whatsoever. That seemed bizarre to me and a minority of faculty colleagues, both in the department and the college. The College Council vote was mixed but positive, and I chose to honor the vote. It turned out that the major, which already existed at several peer universities, was a success and led indirectly to higher enrollments, even in Greek and Latin; the classical studies majors wanted to know Greek and Latin. The majority was right, and I was wrong, though wise enough to defer.
Even though I love small discussion classes, I am also a fan of superb lectures, which model high standards of thought and elocution, inspire students, and encourage them to work through the material analytically, synthesize ideas, and develop questions as they listen. A few colleges and universities have lecture classes that everyone says you must take. At Williams College, the Introduction to Art History served this prominent role; as recently as 1988, 58 percent of the graduating class, representing majors across the full spectrum of the arts and sciences, had taken the year-long lecture course (Toomajian). When I became dean, I proposed that we elevate our best lecturers by creating the temporary designation Notre Dame Master Lecturer for those faculty members who were excellent scholars, had very high student evaluations, regularly taught courses with more than a hundred students, and did not inflate grades. My colleagues were aghast that I would introduce such a concept to a community that prizes small classes; they gave the idea a resounding no, and I had to retreat.

Still, there are unambiguous areas where an administrator has considerable power or means to elicit motivation; these lie above all in vision, personnel, and budget.

First, academic leaders can inspire and motivate faculty toward a vision that is widely shared. The most powerful and enduring tool of any administrator is vision, and the ideal strategy for motivating faculty members to further the university’s goals is to collaborate with them to craft an appealing vision. When we act because we identify with a vision, we are intrinsically motivated. A vision must be collectively formed, but there is no question that the role played by academic leaders is central.

The second realm involves personnel, that is, hiring faculty, making tenure decisions, and appointing academic leaders: the first case requires considering candidates put forward by the departments, and the latter two cases require consulting with faculty members. Although these decisions, which determine the personnel who will carry out a vision, are made in consultation with faculty, administrators tend to have the final say.

Finally, budget expresses vision through priorities and differential allocations. The apportionment of resources is normally not an issue of faculty governance. Departments may request a faculty position from the dean, but they do not vote on whether they will receive it. The faculty has a right to be consulted and informed, but it does not have authority over
budgetary decisions. And it is through the budget that incentives are most fully realized and, indeed, that negative consequences can be felt—for example, when only minimal resources are allocated to weaker departments. In this book, I tell the story of how I worked with vision, personnel, and budget without holding back tales of my own missteps.

For a university to flourish, it needs to embrace a distinctive vision and instantiate or embody that vision in specific practices. I use my own experience at Notre Dame as a lens through which to tell of the challenges as well as of the best and worst practices in realizing the idea of a distinctive university. Though many of my examples come from Notre Dame, which can be viewed as unusually distinctive, my goal is to use this university simply as an exemplar. Decades ago Burton Clark identified a set of distinctive institutions, focusing on small liberal arts colleges: Antioch, with its work-study program and community participation; Reed, with its combination of intellectual vigor and nonconformity; and Swarthmore, with its signature honors program. Religious colleges, single-sex colleges, and historically black colleges are further obvious examples of distinctive institutions that inspire allegiance, dedication, and affection. George Dennis O’Brien ended his postpresidential memoir with a plea for more distinctive and mission-driven universities, ones with a “specific character” and, drawing on the language of Burton Clark, an “institutional saga” (217). More recently, Jonathan Cole has lamented the “lack of differentiation among our leading universities” and called for “a more intense search for individual identity” (Toward 274, cf. 61).

One can criticize many universities for looking too similar to one another and employing as their markers vague and indistinguishable rhetoric, which often amounts to fostering excellent research and educating future leaders. I have heard more than one high school senior announce after a tour of multiple college campuses, “They’re all the same!” Despite the trend toward similarity in self-presentation, all colleges and universities are at some level distinctive, though along a spectrum, with some more interchangeable and others more distinct. In fact, most American colleges and universities do see themselves as distinctive; more than half of the nation’s private colleges and universities, for example, are religious. Although one can learn from other universities and their practices, each college or university benefits by making general
practices its own, by being different. In this light, processing stories about other distinctive colleges and universities can be helpful. Clark's book sought to help us understand distinction through case studies. More recently, George Keller has written a case study about Elon University, and Bill Bowen has offered general insights into administration by focusing on lessons learned at Princeton.

Through concepts and stories, my study explores challenges and puzzles that arise when we seek to realize the idea of a distinctive university. Though I occasionally interweave literature on higher education and management as well as data, my analysis is based mainly on experience and reflection, including seventeen years in administration, six as a chairperson at two institutions and eleven as a dean. The tale interweaves the personal narrative, the idea of a distinctive university, and prominent structures of the American university, with examples taken from practice, into one larger story.

Part 1, “Vision and Change,” links the historical development of the idea of a university with transformations in vision and argues for the value of distinctive vision even today. Chapter 1 provides a broader setting for the more specific narrative that follows. How have universities historically been led by a distinctive vision? How should we understand the two most significant changes in the history of the idea of the university, the German revolution in the early nineteenth century and the American transformation after World War II? In what ways do our universities today differ from what they should be? Recognizing gaps that need to be addressed is one possible way to move toward articulating a distinctive vision and effecting change. My second chapter emphasizes the advantages of vision and distinctive identity, offers examples of contradictory and compelling visions, and explores the ways in which vision can motivate change.

Part 2, “Embodying and Funding the Vision,” shows that a vision without embodiment and resources is illusory. Chapter 3 exhibits the extent to which even a compelling intellectual vision must always be linked to rhetoric, support structures, and community. It also addresses contexts in which vision can only be realized by working through conflict. Chapter 4 addresses nuanced connections between vision and funding. Here, and in part 3, one finds firsthand reflections on the landscape and inner workings of the American university.
Part 3, “Structures, Strategies, Struggles,” reflects on administrators’ more pragmatic tools, which explain to some degree the distinguishing characteristics and indeed the success of the great American university. The overarching structures and strategies, each of which receives its own chapter, are flexibility, competition, incentives, accountability, and community. Each is a means to realize a distinctive vision, even if community is both a means and an end. The chapters conclude with the challenges and problems that arise with these otherwise attractive concepts.

Whereas I introduce my own story in the remainder of this section, in chapter 1 I look more broadly at the historical and contemporary context. All of the subsequent chapters interweave my personal voice with broader ideas and data.

Over the course of many years, I have experienced a wide range of American universities. Williams, my undergraduate alma mater, is a liberal arts college with just over two thousand students. I received my doctorate at Princeton, a private research university. Ohio State, where I taught for twelve years and was an administrator for five, is one of the country’s largest comprehensive public universities and today has more than fifty-eight thousand students. For the past nineteen years I have been at Notre Dame, one of the nation’s top-twenty universities and arguably America’s leading Catholic university. My experience draws on the diversity of the American system, which, along with its liberal arts colleges, private research universities, and large public universities, also includes community colleges with relatively easy student access and modest fees. America benefits from this institutional diversity.

I have also had extensive experience at German universities. I studied for one semester at an American program affiliated with the University of Bonn and for two years directly at the University of Tübingen, where I completed a master’s degree. Some years later I taught at the University of Dresden and at the University of Essen, where I also enjoyed a Humboldt Fellowship. In 2009, I served as Christian-Wolff-Professor at the Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg. At these universities, I developed great admiration for the distinctive strengths of a different tradition, including the students’ remarkable independence, the high academic standards, and the strong sense for the intrinsic value of
study and scholarship. Some of my criticisms of the American university include comparisons with German universities. One can learn from other universities’ best practices, even when one’s own system or university is superb.

When I was a graduate student at Princeton, those of us teaching German language and culture had an office together in a spacious and comfortable attic. My teaching developed in the context of sharing best practices with colleagues. Even today my greatest advances tend to come from speaking with colleagues about challenges they face and strategies they employ. We certainly do know, on the basis of empirical research, some basic principles of pedagogy: for instance, that students learn more when they are actively engaged in the learning process and when they can also learn from their peers. Teaching well means being attentive to such principles; beyond that, good teachers know their material, reflect on the match between learning goals and student performance, and ensure common sense and creativity, which are enriched by the sharing of best practices.

Administration is not radically different. The few absolutely essential principles are effectively complemented by the sharing of common challenges and best practices. Despite the name, best practices can become better still when they are shared with others, who make them their own and thereby enrich them further. No less important than best practices are mistakes from which we can learn.

When I was dean, we had monthly meetings of the twenty-one chairpersons, four associate deans, and three senior staff persons, who reported to me. The agenda had three categories: brief items, which I zipped through very quickly and summarized in a follow-up e-mail; discussion items, which took the bulk of our time; and best practices, which entailed chairpersons, usually but not always at my invitation, speaking about some innovative or productive activity in their departments, be it in teaching, mentoring, public relations, or any number of other areas. Chairpersons liked this part of the meeting the best, and so did I.

One of the challenges of being an administrator is that you are often alone. You wrestle frequently with personnel issues, which cannot be shared. Venting about complexities or frustrations with a colleague is
inappropriate. Therefore, to have a window onto the experience of another administrator can be advantageous. Also, there is a natural human desire to see theory in the world, and practical examples can be inspiring to others. Administrators at diverse kinds of institutions often face similar challenges.

Some years ago I wrote a book about the idea of a Catholic university. I also gave talks that introduced audiences to the book. I was often asked about next steps, and my talks increasingly became focused not on the abstract idea of a Catholic university but on strategies to realize the idea, which drew on my experience as dean. Widening the circle some, I also gave talks to leaders of Christian colleges and universities about aspects of mission that were more formal and expansive, including plans for ensuring that chairpersons are encouraged, well supported, and given appropriate feedback. Then I wrote a book about the value of a liberal arts education, and similar practical discussions ensued. If we accept this vision of the liberal arts, how can we realize it on our campus? This book builds on the reception of those two books to address the following: how to bridge the normative (what we should be) and the descriptive (what we are now) through the strategic.

Further reflections on strategy emerged in the context of a series of talks I gave that led to a third book, this time for a German audience, on the distinguishing characteristics of American higher education and the following questions: What can Germans learn from the American university and what should they avoid? I realized that some of the stories I told to Germans might also have wide appeal in the United States.

Serving as a chairperson or dean is in a sense not that complicated. One needs to have a vision, some sense of strategy, a sensibility for structures, and a capacity to deal with people. The issues are basically the same, only larger and more intense, as one moves up the ladder. Certainly some handbooks can be useful, as several were to me when I would think out loud about how their thoughts applied to my own situation.

But even good technical books are of less value than the indirect insights one gains from reading philosophy and literature and exchanging stories and experiences. I often said to colleagues that you don’t really need experience to become a chairperson: It is a matter of common sense. I still believe that, but I also learned that because extensive experience brings with it a certain kind of expertise, you become more efficient. We
know from cognitive science that expertise and efficiency are linked (Neubauer and Fink); in an administrative context, experience accelerates decision making and gives you a wider range for your deliberations. Experience can also be vicarious; as we listen to the stories of others, we gain expertise.

This book is not an overview of American higher education, as Derek Bok offers in Higher Education in America, nor is it an introduction to a particular administrative role, like the many handbooks on being a dean or chairperson, though it contains elements of both. It is animated by ideas about the value of articulating and embodying a distinctive vision for higher education and is enriched by experiential reflection, which seeks to give life and color to the story.

The book was written partly for academic administrators, especially but not exclusively administrators at distinctive colleges and universities: deans and aspiring deans, who may be interested in learning from a former dean and his experiences; chairpersons, whose roles are not dissimilar and who may want to understand how a dean thinks; and other administrators, such as associate deans, associate provosts, and directors, who face challenges they will find mirrored here. I hope faculty members, whose interest in the inner workings of the university has increased dramatically, partly because of disturbing changes and new challenges, will also find reflections that engage them as they think about their own institutional cultures and strategies. Beyond its audience of American administrators and faculty members, the book may also interest global readers, who turn to the world’s leading system of higher education for ideas and best practices, as well as to those American readers—from board members and donors to students and parents—who are curious about the functioning of higher education.

Let me turn now to some personal reflections. I begin my story at the end. After serving as dean for a decade and being very much ready to return to the faculty ranks, I anticipated several potential challenges.

The first was seemingly trivial but not unimportant. As dean, I had a superb staff. I never had to worry about mundane matters, but I knew that as a regular faculty member I would. Before I left office, I ordered a scanner and a dictation program for my computer and made sure that I
knew where to make copies, how to place books on reserve, where to order supplies, and so forth. I anticipated as many practical needs as I could.

The second involved giving up the activity of shaping a college. A dean is the center of a great deal of activity, and one gets an adrenaline rush from making things happen. What would replace that dynamism, that sense of mission and accomplishment? Would I miss it?

Despite immersing myself in the larger enterprise, I found I was even happier when I could steal a few hours alone, usually on Sunday evenings, for thinking and writing. The intrinsic value of scholarship is great, and little, including higher administration, can trump the joy of doing something for its own sake.

Being dean means that you are always pressed for time. One has to juggle so much. When as a graduate student I juggled in the marketplaces of Germany, I had the freedom to choose how many balls, rings, clubs, and apples to send into the air; as dean, others often tossed me the objects, and they came unexpectedly and relentlessly, too many at once for me not to let a few drop. Often I would go for a swim in the early evening to wake myself up for the second half of the workday. One day I snuck in a quick swim during the afternoon. Racing to the office and entering through the back door, I was scurrying through the suite, ready to greet a donor, when my staff practically tackled me and told me in exasperation that my hair was heading in about sixty different directions. In rushing out of the locker room, I had neglected to comb my hair or look in the mirror. My colleagues quickly searched their drawers and purses to find a brush so as to rescue me.

Time and inattention were constant challenges. My wife and I had turned down a couple of invitations from a generous local donor, when I saw an invitation in my inbox. I glanced at it, called my wife, and told her that she didn’t need to go but that I should, since we had been unable to accept the last few times. I wrote yes on the invitation and dropped it back in the outbox for my assistant. On the day of the event, the invitation was back in my inbox; this time, I looked at it a bit more closely. It was not a social event, it turned out, but a fundraiser at the host’s home with one of Indiana’s senators. I lived in Michigan. Oh, well, I thought, and headed out. There was a donation box for checks. I didn’t have a checkbook on me, so I passed by the box and found myself getting my picture taken.
with the senator. I then proceeded on to a modest buffet and an after-dinner address. The next day, my assistant informed me that the host’s assistant had called. Since there was no check from me, she wanted to know if I was planning to send my check in the mail. I said (of course) yes and looked now for a third time at the materials (this time very closely). There were various levels of giving suggested. I decided that being already late, I should probably not pick the lowest amount. Each Christmas after that, I received a picture of the senator and his family along with a note.

My wife called it my thousand dollar Christmas card.

Hurrying from one event or meeting to another and being so oriented toward fund raising, structural issues, and, often, long-term goals, a dean misses the kind of immediate personal satisfaction that comes from focusing more on teaching—seeing students smile, for example, as they get excited about a topic or grasp new insights. When as dean I would come home and be in an especially good mood, my wife would sometimes say, “You taught today, didn’t you?” She could tell that being around students and engaging texts and ideas, as opposed to dealing with management issues and long-range university planning, led to a more immediate and visible joy.

My Christmas vacation each year consisted of carefully analyzing the promotion-and-tenure packets of approximately forty candidates; writing assessments of those cases, which at times were several pages in length; and then making my recommendations to the university promotion-and-tenure committee. In difficult cases I would meet with the departmental committees just after the holidays or in some cases before. For eleven years, that work pretty much consumed the entire holiday vacation. No, I would not miss it.

After being dean for such a long time, I realized my third challenge would be how I would react when someone new came in and started dismantling things I had created, without even asking why I had introduced them.

Still, I had stayed in the position long enough that most of the important structural changes had become part of the routine. I was superfluous, and the changes were no longer foreign innovations but had become the way Notre Dame did things. One of my goals as dean had been to institutionalize changes so that I personally would become

© University of Notre Dame Press
irrelevant. Much of what we had done was now part of the fabric of the college. I wasn’t needed, and that’s exactly what I wanted. My successor, John McGreevy, had worked with me for five years as chairperson of one of Notre Dame’s best departments. In becoming dean, he was sacrificing his scholarship to take a turn in administration because of his love for the institution, so he had no qualms about contacting me now and again, especially in his early years, when he wanted advice on a particular puzzle. Whatever he did change, I welcomed. After eleven years, I was eager to see someone else set new accents, address what was not working well, push new initiatives. I knew that a university benefits from fresh ideas, new personalities, and the ritual experience of new beginnings.

The fourth challenge was getting back to full-time teaching and research. I had continued to teach one course per year as dean, which had been good for my soul. It had also offered me a window onto current Notre Dame students and given me a shared topic with faculty members. I had always preferred the somewhat antiquated model, which I admired already as an undergraduate at Williams College, whereby an administrator is an active scholar-teacher, who serves for a period of time and then passes the baton to return to full-time teaching and scholarship. Having had the opportunity to serve so many years in administration, I also pushed that older model to its limit. I looked forward to serving as a full-time teacher and scholar. When I asked a former provost what advice he had for someone leaving administration, he recommended that I teach and do research in some new areas. So besides returning to German language teaching after many decades of other kinds of teaching, I added a course on German cinema and a year-long humanities seminar for first-year honors students, taking them in the fall from Homer to Dante and in the spring from Machiavelli to Woody Allen. Being back in the faculty ranks was more fun than I could have imagined.

On the research front, I had continued to publish as dean but, save for a very slim book on the idea of a Catholic university and an emerging book on the value of the liberal arts, I had not developed new research projects. I was leaving the dean’s office intellectually empty. This is the predicament of long-serving, higher-level administrators. Frank Rhodes writes soberly of presidents: “Busy with this, preoccupied with that, distracted by a dozen pressing issues, presidents develop an inner emptiness and personal hollowness; they are starved of the intellectual and spiritual nourishment which is the sustenance of the campus” (18). I was saved
after I stepped down by a lengthy leave, which allowed me to develop a large number of new research projects. I now have three postdean books behind me, am overseeing a large multiyear grant, have another two books well under way, and have ideas for several more. The leave completely recharged me intellectually. It is difficult to think new academic thoughts when all of your time is consumed by meetings and memos.

The transition also brought with it some minor disadvantages. It is much simpler to tell someone outside the university that you are a dean than a professor. As dean, one goes to the office every day, and to the outside world, it looks much like real work. A professor may not teach every day and so may stay home, getting even more work done, but it doesn’t appear that way. Americans still associate work with the office or the job site. One Friday afternoon, before I had become dean, my wife came home after a tough work week; she opened the garage door that faced onto our living room and saw me lying on the couch, seemingly watching TV, with a Coke on the table. She looked at me in disgust and said, “You never work!”

My defense—that I was watching a John Ford film, on which I was writing an essay—somehow didn’t dispel the impression.

That Sunday afternoon I folded some wash, put it away, and then sat on the bed against a backrest and started reading. Shortly thereafter my wife came into the room, saw me reading, and said in exasperation, “You’re always working!” I replied, “The two statements can’t both be true!”

A professor’s work is his hobby. Being dean, however meaningful the labor, is nothing like pursuing a hobby, so I actually looked in those years like an upstanding member of the community. After stepping down, I became, in the eyes of nonacademics, one of those professors who never works.

I can recall my wife many years ago telling a coworker in Columbus that I worked at Ohio State. “What does he do?” “He teaches German . . . and he does research.” Silence. “Research? What kind of research does a German professor do?” “Well, he’s a literary critic. He writes books about other books, you know, novels and dramas and such.” “Oh, you mean, CliffsNotes.”

I had to cut back on some scholarly activities as dean and I rarely attended disciplinary conferences. I felt a bit disconnected from my scholarly peers, especially the next generation, when I began attending
again. It was as if I, as a German scholar, had been away for a few months, but the profession and its personnel had suddenly aged a dozen years. There were full professors who had been graduate students when I took my extended exit. A saving grace has been that much of my research had moved into broader areas, and I have different kinds of connections.

There have also been partly unanticipated advantages. When I left office, I knew each faculty member, and so have a different relationship to my colleagues and my environment than if I had not served in administration for many years. Walking the faculty halls as a former dean is like strolling through an expanded departmental space, where you know hundreds of colleagues, often quite well. Those colleagues greet you and engage in friendly conversations in ways that are quite different from the often hurried and at times agenda-laden exchanges I managed when rushing across campus as dean.

But there was one final challenge that awaited me, one that I had not in the least anticipated. I finished my term at the end of June 2008, but I worked until about six o’clock in the evening on July 3, trying to finalize the recruitment of two endowed chairs and postdating letters I had not had the chance to clear off my desk. At six that evening I turned off my computer, walked outside, clapped and rubbed my hands, and said to my wife, “I’m done.”

But for the next eighteen months or so, my dreams were overwhelmingly and repeatedly related to my life as dean and the kinds of puzzles I had encountered. They were not amusing, as dreams sometimes are, but an extension of work: I discussed tenure standards with faculty members, gave a rationale for students taking four courses per semester instead of five, and offered reasons to fund a proposed social science building. So while my conscious mind was on to new activities, my body was telling me that the traces of all-consuming administrative work, one seventy-five-hour week after another for more than a decade, could not be washed away so easily.

Before becoming an administrator, I never dreamed of it.

Within a year of receiving tenure, I was invited to breakfast by my dean at Ohio State, Mike Riley. There, he explained that the recent search for a chairperson, which had led to both internal and external finalists,
had not brought forward the candidate he thought would be best. I was
that candidate, he said, and if I told my colleagues I would be willing to
serve, he would take care of the rest. He knew they would support me. I
protested that I was much too young, that it would not be fair, that there
were better candidates—all to no avail.

My previous executive experience had consisted of running the
kitchen of a restaurant one summer when I was seventeen. Five days
before Independence Day weekend, the chef announced he was leaving.
The owners saw no other option than to close until they could find a re-
placement. I had begun as a dishwasher two summers earlier, had moved
up to fry cook and now assistant, and had learned most of the dishes.
I told the owner that if he would bake the bread and if the chef, before
leaving, would teach me how to prepare the sauces and broil the meats,
I could take over the kitchen. I became the chef, preparing dishes from
Chateaubriand to lobster thermidor. When unexpected requests came my
way, I had to improvise. One customer ordered his sirloin “black and
blue.” I asked an older waitress what that meant. “Black on the outside
and raw on the inside,” she replied. I turned on the gas burner and stuck
the steak in the flames. One afternoon I made some mashed potatoes with
cheese and chives, laid them out in a hotel pan, and spread bacon strips
on top. It seemed too long a description for the servers’ blackboard. I
thought of the odd circumstance that “shrimp scampi” means “shrimp
shrimp” (scampi being the plural of scampo, prawn in Italian), so, armed
with my high school knowledge of German, I wrote on the board “Kar-
toffeln potatoes.” That night I sold about eighty-five Kartoffeln potatoes
(potatoes potatoes) and, for the less curious and adventuresome, a few
smatterings of Delmonico, Lyonnaise, baked, and fries.

In much the same way that I had gotten in over my head in the res-
taurant, I accepted the position of chairperson ahead of my time. Yet here
I perceived a calling. Already while I had been an assistant professor, I
had developed a sense of what the department most needed, but I was
torn about serving as chairperson. On the one hand, as a newly tenured
associate professor, I wanted to preserve my research time and thought
the appointment was in principle inappropriately early. On the other
hand, I knew the problems and had ideas about how to deal with them.
We had been in difficult circumstances, and the first task, I determined,
was to develop, with an internal advisory committee, a professional code
of conduct that was later unanimously approved and ensured that relations remained civil and that graduate students, for example, would never be the victims of faculty strife. In all, those five years went very well. We implemented innovations of various kinds, and our department, along with a small number of others, was chosen for selective excellence funding. We developed a vision and set of priorities. We received external funding for a visiting professorship from Germany, a study abroad program in Dresden, visiting graduate students from Germany, and a beautiful Victorian home on the edge of campus, which was renovated and converted into a German house suitable for residency and events. We reformed both the undergraduate and graduate curricula, creating diverse tracks for majors and offering graduate students new opportunities for apprenticeships in teaching literature. Unanimous approval was given to a document on variable teaching assignments, with some faculty teaching more, some less.

Since I in many ways did not want to become chairperson, I was in a good negotiating position and was able to arrange for an acting chairperson during my first year, which I spent on leave, though I was still responsible for budget, promotion and tenure, and other weighty matters. In January, I was called into the dean’s office; informed that the college had to come up with its share of a midseason budget cut, unexpectedly imposed by the state legislature; and told that I needed to make some drastic cuts of my own. Among other tasks, I had to call an eminent professor at Yale, who was slated to join us as a visiting professor and who had written a sterling review of my first book, in other words, someone I had imagined could become a mentor and writer of recommendation letters; that dream ended when I asked him if he could get back on Yale’s payroll, since we no longer had any money for him. Welcome to administration!

But overseeing the budget also became an opportunity for creativity. We converted two departing faculty lines to fellowships so that we were able to fund graduate fellowships more generously and increase the number of graduate student research fellowships. I reasoned that we would likely have lost the lines in any case, but, more importantly, we did not need the courses offered by those departing faculty. We needed more competitive but fewer graduate students and stronger support, including top-off dollars, to compete with the best stipends nationally. We used
funds to create an innovative visiting position for a two-week residency that involved regular breakfasts with students, a public lecture, and an intensive compact graduate seminar (for one-third of the price we had once paid to have someone fly in once a week for a ten-week quarter). Because it was a two-week instead of a ten-week commitment, we were able to obtain our first-choice candidate each time.

When, after three years, a new dean arrived, he asked if he could use me to pilot a review scheme for chairpersons. After reviewing the results, he told me that on his five-point scale, he had never seen evaluations like mine, which included numerous 5+ and 5+++ scores—a great contrast to some of the scores I would later receive as dean. During my first term, I had the image of the recalcitrant chair, uneager to stay in the job but doing fine work, and that very much helped my reception. I was offered another four-year term, which I was inclined not to take. As part of the negotiation, the dean offered me either two or four years; the four-year term involved a much higher base salary, but the two-year one still included a welcome raise. I took the two years. I did not see myself as a long-term administrator.

When I moved to Notre Dame and the dean who hired me announced a week after my arrival that he was moving on, a search commenced. Someone nominated me, and I composed a letter saying that I preferred not to do it. I did not want to be impolite, so I did not send it. In January, when the search was presumably well under way, the provost called to say he had never heard back from me. I dutifully printed out the letter and brought it to his office. I trudged across the snowy campus in my boots and hand delivered it to his assistant. I had left the window a bit too open and I became for the second time a reluctant administrator. But here, too, and even more so, I sensed a mission and threw myself into the work.

In the process of deciding to come to Notre Dame, I had spent considerable time thinking about its strengths and weaknesses in comparison with Ohio State. I had developed a sense for what should be preserved and enhanced and what needed radical reform. These ideas ranged from a crisper vision and higher tenure standards to seemingly mundane matters of administration. Because I intended to get in and get out, I worked...
very quickly. I ignored the conventional wisdom about waiting a year before undertaking any significant reforms. Instead, I waited a month, until I could meet publicly with the faculty. On the day before classes started, I called the faculty together and explained why I had grown to love the distinctive mission of Notre Dame, but I also stressed that we were not nearly as good as we could or should be. We had too many long-term associate professors and needed to introduce annual reviews and merit raises. We would change the practice of all departing faculty positions staying in the departments and would instead return them to the dean for reallocation. We needed to reduce underenrolled classes and the number of classes with too many students. Despite the strong rhetoric on my part, most of the faculty questions that day were about less controversial matters, including the integration of academic and residential life and Notre Dame’s distinctive interest in ultimate questions.

When I explained my plans in still greater detail a few weeks later to a group of about sixty donors, who formed our advisory council, they focused on the changes. They were both enthusiastic and deeply skeptical. One of them mumbled to another, “This guy won’t last very long.” Another, used to a dog-and-pony show about how great Notre Dame was, was taken aback not only by my sober assessment of our gaps but even more so by my intentions. “Does anyone else at Notre Dame know of these plans?” he asked.

My highest goal as dean focused on vision and my second on strategies of efficiency and accountability that I thought would also be necessary prerequisites for gaining more resources. I did not initially place much stress on the social element, which was for me not a natural strength and whose importance I had underestimated. At Ohio State that did not matter for several reasons. First, it was not expected of me, a young associate professor, who had been drafted into the job a year after tenure; and fortunately one of the senior faculty considered hosting social events for the department to be part of her vocation. Second, since we had only twenty or so colleagues in our department at Ohio State, I saw them on a regular basis, and additional social events were not a high priority. I spent all day Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays in the office; I taught on those days and my door was open all day long. The chair’s door opened not only onto the departmental suite, which housed the assistants, mailboxes, and the like, but also directly onto the corridor.
Unless I was speaking with a faculty member or a student, both doors were always wide open. On Tuesdays and Thursdays I worked at home, preparing my teaching, doing more complex administrative work, and engaging in research. I told faculty not to hesitate calling me there. A short interruption was nothing. My wife worked, and we had no children, so knowing only I would answer, my colleagues called as needed. Third, the social dimension can mean different things in different contexts. For us, a department that had seen much strife in recent years, the social involved running meetings effectively and diplomatically, engaging in level-headed conversations with all, and creating structures and procedures that ensured civility and fairness.

As a dean with hundreds of faculty members, the social element was wildly different. The challenge and difficulty were exacerbated because I had come from elsewhere, and was not, therefore, known. Moreover I had inherited a very informal operation. Everyone had direct contact with the dean, and there were few or no procedures, faculty committees, and the like. Changing how everything functioned meant also changing the social fabric. In addition, I made multiple decisions, in terms of both structure and personnel, that went against tradition. One does not remain wildly popular, for example, by announcing that faculty lines are no longer owned by departments or by overturning positive tenure recommendations.

Beyond those factors one of my own personality traits created challenges. As a chairperson, one can be a modest introvert, but as a dean, that is impossible. I remember that the first time I taught, I was suddenly transformed from an introvert into an extrovert, but that was always only for an hour or so. As a natural introvert, I found my new role as dean difficult. In my family I was the youngest of three boys. When we were growing up, the neighbors jokingly called us “the vert-brothers.” I was the “introvert,” my middle brother was the “extrovert,” and my oldest brother was awarded the name, well, I’d better not say.

To succeed as dean, I had to become an extrovert, and the number of years I spent in the role fundamentally changed my personality. I say to my students, “You have to play the role of an articulate intellectual, and over time you will become increasingly articulate and intellectual.” As dean I played the role of the extrovert, who increasingly reached out to experience and enjoy other people’s company.
In fact, after my five-year review as dean, one of the faculty members on the committee told me that she had pegged me on the Myers-Briggs scale as intuitive, thinking, and judging, but she was not sure whether I was introverted or extroverted. I had heard of the scale but I had never taken the test. When I took several versions of it, I saw that she was right on the first three, and the results were mixed on the scale of introversion/extroversion. I was indeed in my history and core introverted, but as dean I had become extroverted. I had almost managed to become someone else. In the overall scheme I had moved from what David Keirsey calls the “Mastermind” (encompassing less than 1 percent of the population) to the “Fieldmarshal” (encompassing less than 2 percent of the population). I kept retaking the test to try to come out with a more innocent and appealing title like “Healer” or “Teacher,” but I failed each time. In truth, some of what seemed to be the strengths and weaknesses of the Doctor Mabuse and Erwin Rommel types had in fact surfaced in my review, a rather bracing and sobering experience to which I return later in the book.

Since I still saw myself in some sense as a faculty member, who thinks independently, and not yet as a dean, who has a greater administrative and social identity, I also fell into the trap of underestimating the role of simple and innocuous ritual and overestimating the value of engaged intellectual discussion. When asked in the first weeks of my tenure as dean if I would give some opening remarks for a gender studies panel and reception, I said yes, and offered some thoughts about gender studies that went beyond, “Gender studies is essential to our flourishing as a college, have a great year, and enjoy the refreshments!” I reflected out loud on the strengths and weaknesses of gender studies as a discipline and on strategies for its distinctive flourishing at Notre Dame. I suggested that it not isolate itself from the departments but instead reach out to and seek to influence the more traditional disciplines; that its scholars write in a language intelligible to colleagues and students from all disciplines; that it weigh the self-cancelling structure of any reduction of values to power alone and instead embed itself within a tradition that makes strong, rational arguments for the validity of universal human rights; and finally, that it continue to bring its appealing existential component to scholarship and teaching but be wary of restricting justice to identity politics, thereby overlooking broader issues of neglected justice, such as those involving future generations.
It was not a smart move.

The halls were abuzz about what hidden messages I was trying to convey. I received letters, e-mails, and requests for meetings. I told the provost that my tenure might be shorter than he intended. But in the end, the commotion was calmed. I met with several people one-on-one over lunch; they immediately saw that I was still thinking as a scholar, not as an administrator, and that my arguments were not absurd. Inadvertently, I had initiated a not uninteresting public debate on complex puzzles that continued in one of the campus newspapers. I had learned in a surprising way that being a dean meant people really listened to what I had to say, and I quickly became aware that if I was going to think out loud, not as a scholar, but as an administrator, I would need to consider the occasions very carefully. Since one of an administrator's goals is to cause a rupture only when it serves an important and targeted purpose, gaining a deeper understanding of the value of occasionally innocuous talking points was valuable.

I was also modestly surprised at how often, at times on unexpected occasions, I was asked to speak. In my first weeks I was invited by one of our centers to an award ceremony, and, after a pleasant dinner with faculty and guests and a few minutes of comments by the director, I unexpectedly heard, “And now Dean Roche will tell us how important the such-and-such center is to the life of Notre Dame.” I did not know that I was on the docket. I somehow managed to hit the right notes, even after wondering in the back of my mind whether I had even internalized the names of the two honorees. From that point onward, when I was on my way to any event, I always thought of a word or two to say, should it be necessary or appropriate.

Another challenge for the scholar-teacher as dean involves suddenly giving up research projects, when one is, let's say, in the middle of a book. I had accumulated significant research time from my days at Ohio State, and I insisted on taking a year's leave, even though I would continue to be involved with important issues, such as promotion and tenure, senior hiring, budget, and fund raising. I took that partial leave during my third year as dean. I was still involved in administrative work about a third of the time, but I was able to finish two books that were well under way when I entered the dean's office and to write another very short book. That was very important for my identity as a faculty member and scholar.
Although some faculty told me they appreciated having an active scholar-teacher as dean and no faculty member ever said a negative word to me directly, I was told in my five-year review that a good number of faculty members had complained about the leave. A dean, they said, should be first and foremost a dean. In truth, if the leave had not been granted, I would have declined the post and had a much different story to tell.

When I was asked by the provost to stay for one additional year beyond ten, I was not keen on the idea. I could have imagined stepping down after about eight or nine years. But several factors—the arrivals of a new president and a new provost and my desire to see multiple internal candidates for dean develop, and ensure they had some leave time before I announced my departure—resulted in my deciding to finish my second term. I had certainly not paced myself for more. As it turned out, however, I stayed on for an eleventh year, which meant I ended up serving as an administrator for seventeen of my first eighteen years as a tenured faculty member. The provost and I agreed that in the second semester of year ten, I would take a partial leave to work on another book. That spring I was on 90 percent of the time, which still represented a break but demonstrated how quickly administrative positions can become complex. Fortunately, as I went into my final year, the provost made clear to the faculty that nothing would go on hold: He had full confidence in my work, and I would lead as if this were not my last year as dean, so that no time would be wasted in a transition. Just as I did not hold back in my first year, I did not hold back in my final year.

Faculty members tend to have an intuitive reluctance to serve as academic administrators; most faculty members were drawn to the profession through a love of teaching or research and were then socialized into an atmosphere whose default rhetoric expresses unease about administration. My initial reluctance about moving into administration shifted over time to ambivalence: I remained eager to return to the faculty ranks even as I enjoyed the different puzzles and positive effects of being an engaged administrator. There were also clear moments of fulfillment, as I worked with others to realize a vision and enhance a community of scholars and learners. An academic administrator with even a modest vision and a modicum of formal capacities, I saw, can address inadequacies and make a positive difference; in that sense, administration is worth the time and effort. I grew to embrace what had seemed foreign
and uninviting. I saw more and more positive changes, developed an entirely new cohort of colleagues and friends beyond the department and later the college, and learned to appreciate more fully the ways staff persons, often behind the scenes, provide effective support for faculty and students. Further, administration allowed me to develop different sides of myself. The unusually quick pace sharpened various of my capacities and was in its own way energizing, even as it pulled me away from otherwise preferable pursuits. I developed a broader horizon, learning much more about the detailed workings of a university as well as about broader issues that affect higher education. And I gained a much stronger sense of collective identity: I realized in new ways that faculty members who had administrative experience were able, if they returned to the faculty ranks, to bring new perspectives to the local collective and help break down the automatic divide between faculty and administration.