

**General Faculty Address
September 11, 2020**

Three years ago, in the late summer of 2017, I decided that I wanted to be the Provost at Fairfield University. I had been named Interim in January of that year, somewhat by default when the University was still engaged in a Presidential search, and then Provost Lynn Babington temporarily took on the Presidency. Nine months later, Lynn had left Fairfield to become President at Chaminade University of Honolulu, Mark Nemec had been appointed Fairfield's ninth President in the Ignatian tradition, and a search for the University's next Provost was about to commence.

In three years, I have not thought twice about that decision – not during that first year when it meant I had to go through a national search, competing against a large and highly qualified pool of candidates while concurrently serving in the role; and not during the past year when all of our roles have been upended and re-defined by an unforeseen global pandemic.

What I have thought about repeatedly over the past three years, and most especially in recent months, is a question that I was asked as a semi-finalist during the interview process. I wonder if Amalia Rusu who asked the question – or Bob Epstein, Emily Smith, John McDermott, or Linda Roney, members of the search committee who also heard my answer – have themselves thought twice about it since then.

The question had to do with my approach to crisis management as it related to making potentially unpopular decisions. It was one of the more challenging moments of the interview process – in part, because I was confounded by the juxtaposition of crisis management and popularity in the same question.

For me – the daughter of a mother who was a nurse and a father who (in his time off from his day job as an electrical engineer) was a volunteer firefighter and part-time EMT – crises were defined as emergencies involving immediate life or death decision making and action; situations during which all other considerations – especially those as seemingly frivolous as popularity - were suspended

The only way I could respond was to dissect the question into its elements – to address crisis management and potentially unpopular decisions as separate issues.

I began with crisis management. I explained that through a variety of professional roles and experiences, I had learned that a crucial first step is to identify what is – and what is not – a crisis.

Faculty in Donnarumma Hall preparing to write a manifesto in opposition to the new core curriculum (you know who you are) – not a crisis. Students protesting in the library, at the stag statue, or on social media – not a crisis. Local news outlets picking up a *Mirror* article about racial conflicts between students at our predominately white institution – not a crisis. In fact, faculty collectively organizing around an issue, students learning to use their voice in support of a cause they believe in, and a free-press asking critical questions, are not only non-crises, they are fundamental to the very nature of intellectual life at a University. They represent the excitement and energy of a curious community. As such, they warrant engagement not intervention from the administration.

I explained that in contrast to the excitements of University life, I had I worked through real crises. Conducting emergency mental health screenings of middle school students to determine if they had homicidal tendencies in the days after the Columbine school shooting on

April 20, 1999 was a crisis; securing students in an elementary school building just north of Manhattan on September 11, 2001 (nineteen years ago today) while we identified which of their parents would not be coming home from work that day was a crisis; and managing communication in the GSEAP Dean's office on December 14, 2012 as we received reports of a school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary— a site for our student teachers and school psychology interns - was a crisis.

With regard to crisis management, I explained to the search committee that I knew how to distinguish between the expected churn and excitement of University life and the chaos of real emergency; and that I had in different roles across my professional career worked effectively to respond to both.

With regard to popular decision making, I explained that a Provost serves a wide range of constituents – each of whom holds differing perspectives on any given topic. It would be a rare instance in which students, professors, staff, fellow administrators, parents, board members and alumni would be unanimous in their opinion - whether it be related to curriculum change, program development, faculty hiring, the academic calendar or University spending. Given this, any decision made by a Provost – as part of the typical course of business or in response to an unprecedented situation – would be subject to disapproval by some. And so, to allow concerns with popularity to guide one's decision making would be at best an exercise in frustration and at worst a futile endeavor. Indeed, to do so could be dangerous in some instances, and would undermine the integrity essential to real leadership.

Instead, I had learned to be guided by my own core principles – an unwavering belief in the potential of human development, a commitment to the power of relationships in untapping

that potential, and the value of community in fostering those relationships. I had also learned that these aspirations alone could not yield effective decisions; but when complimented by diligent information gathering, deep understanding of the current context, strategic resource allocation, and clear lines of communication, they could lead me to principled solutions. While not always popular, my decisions would be made with an integrity that I trusted over time would surmount any disapproval ratings.

Although initially challenged by the interview question, I had managed a reply. In my prior professional experience, I had learned how to distinguish excitement from crises and respond effectively to both. As Provost, I would allow integrity and not popularity to guide my decisions. At the time, I was satisfied with my response.

And yet, since then, I have thought more than twice about that question and its juxtaposition of crisis management and popularity. Perhaps, in asking the question, Amalia and the search committee knew something I did not; and that by dissecting the question, I had failed to adequately answer it.

Could it be that in practice - in the real-time doing of the job - engagement in every day excitement and management of unexpected crises are not so clearly distinguishable; that while past experiences cannot fully inform, they are intricately connected to future responsibilities; that aspirations always require strategy in order to be realized; and that most importantly popularity is more than a mere measure of likeability – it is an index of the extent to which the constituents to whom she is responsible feel recognized, valued and supported by the decision maker?

At the time, I could not have imagined a crisis so enduring and so impactful that it would precipitate secondary crises and fuel excitements that would require on-going intervention and relentless engagement. I did not know that the ‘leading-during’ - would be different than ‘working-through’ - a such crisis. Nor did I know that in the midst of on-going and intersecting crises, one’s integrity, approval rating, and most importantly, service to her constituents would be continually questioned—perhaps as a function of each of those constituents’ own working-through processes, or perhaps because transparency is even more crucial in these moments.

Three years later I address you today on the anniversary of a tragedy, in the middle of an ongoing global pandemic whose death toll dwarfs the combined losses of the Columbine, 9/11, and Sandy Hook; a crisis whose future anniversary will constitute a year (or even years) not a day. And simultaneously I address you at the start of an academic year; a time when attention to the excitement and energy of everyday University life should not be suspended – a time when attention to the ongoing and future work must be paid.

Indeed, the very act of opening this academic year is the fruition of work that went on throughout and despite the crisis, fueled by the energy and engagement of a curious and resilient community.

Notwithstanding an unexpected and immediate pivot to remote learning in the spring, Fairfield University’s undergraduate and graduate students successfully finished courses, advanced in their programs of study, and completed degrees. Over 240 of those students were returned from study abroad locations around the world, and educated in 49 specially scheduled late spring and summer courses. Outside of their classes, students completed internships and capstone projects, maintained their independent and faculty-lead research, and applied for and

were awarded prestigious fellowships. Also reimagined as virtual experiences, our spring Innovative Research Symposium and Business Plan Competition drew record numbers of participants and attendees.

Through virtual admitted student days and an on-line June orientation, the University brought forward its second largest and most competitive class to date. To help transition these students to Fairfield, faculty from the College of Arts and Sciences created 42 on-line *Magis* core courses, which were successfully completed by 610 of our incoming students. These students were also welcomed to the Fairfield learning community “determined together” through a series of readings and webinars that culminated in a virtual convocation to begin the academic year on August 31st.

While first-year students engaged in core courses and convocation work, nearly 2500 returning and visiting undergraduate students participated in 112 on-line summer courses offered by faculty from across the academic division, while another 173 students attended 11 different on-campus face to face pilot courses.

Along with a robust undergraduate class, we begin the fall semester with a record-breaking number of graduate student enrollments – over 9000 registered credit hours – in programs across the College and all schools in the University; the fruits of three years’ worth of purposeful labor in pursuit of program development, enhanced marketing and recruitment strategies, and the implementation of innovative pedagogies. Noteworthy among this online and graduate program expansion is Fairfield University’s first ever international graduate program – the Finance MBA offered through a partnership between the Dolan School of Business and Golden Education in Shanghai, China – which launches later this month.

Concurrent with the on-going work of an engaged University community, we immersed ourselves in crisis management, intervention, and planning. You attended Town Hall meetings, authored newsletters, and participated in Deans' coffee hours to raise up your concerns and questions; while also engaging in thousands of hours across CAE workshops, consultations, departmental meetings, and program-wide retreats to plan to deliver courses in a flexible hybrid learning format this fall. Throughout the late spring and early summer, you met in Handbook and Ad Hoc Committees to revise grading and course evaluation policies, Rank and Tenure procedures, and the academic calendar; while the Academic Council met an astonishing ten times to review and respond to evolving plans for fall reopening given health and safety guidelines and restrictions put forth by the State of Connecticut.

As a General Faculty, you made the difficult but responsible decision to prepare for the economic impact of the pandemic on the University by voting to approve a modified MOU for the next two years, and through the efficiencies of Workday you received, signed and returned your contracts within a record 10-day time period.

And last week, as offices re-opened and classes began, through the on-going crisis, you restored our teaching and learning community as you connected with students in classrooms through masks, in tents with whiteboards even when it was raining, and via zoom from remote locations across our region.

Over the course of the semester, you will return – if you have not already - to the routines of your scholarship and research supported by our newly re-organized Office of Research and Grants. You will have the opportunity, during this time that world-wide travel is

not feasible, to reimagine our approach to international education as we restructure Study Abroad to Global Fairfield.

Throughout the academic year, you will continue to confront our institution's own position in the endless plagues of racial injustice and economy inequity as the Presidential Working Group on Inclusive Excellence takes on projects to recruit, retain and promote diverse faculty, staff and students and create a vibrant community through radical hospitality; while a newly formed Commission on Educational Access explores the feasibility of an Arrupe College to ensure greater access to a Fairfield education for first generation students, Pell-eligible students, and students of color.

Arising from our newly realized capacities ignited by the accelerant of tirelessly engaged energy in response to unprecedented circumstances, we will continue to pursue our aspiration to be the modern Jesuit Catholic university. We will build on the strategic initiatives of past years and resume our efforts to evolve and innovate our academic programs

- By embracing big data across all fields of inquiry as this year, we grow our School of Engineering under the leadership of its new Dean,
- By fostering community and industry partnerships as this year, we open a new Media Center and revise our communications programs,
- By expanding our geographic footprint as this year, we explore partner sites for nursing education in areas across the country, and
- By embracing new instructional modalities as this year, we prepare to launch four fully on-line graduate degree programs in spring of 2021.

In other words, in the middle of an ongoing global pandemic and from within the crises we continue to navigate, Fairfield will keep growing and enriching the learning environment in the Jesuit Catholic tradition. As the world seems to be breaking, we will be here building, leaning into what it takes to continue to shape our scholarly community together.

As I prepared to speak with you today, I realized that the ways in which you have approached the difficulties –and seeming polarities--of the last six months have provided me the answer to the question that Amalia posed three years ago. Addressing the juxtaposition of an on-going pandemic and the opening of an academic year is a problem that does not allow for dissection or compartmentalization; rather it calls for the embrace of totality and simultaneity that is engagement and intervention, work and leadership, aspiration and strategy, loss and rebuilding. Those constructs that at first seem to be polar opposites work their way inside us—and because of our engagement with them—and lead us toward transformation. Because of you, I have come to know and believe that.

It is my honor to serve as your Provost.