



STRATEGIC AGENDA

The Making of a Great Catholic University

4 October 2003 Draft

Introduction

The University of St. Thomas was founded by the Basilian Fathers, who were guided in their educational philosophy by the vision of John Henry Cardinal Newman and the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas as the bases for advancing the Catholic intellectual tradition. A dedication to teaching and the cause of truth, wherever it is discovered, is the Basilians' hallmark and legacy. Their motto, "Teach me goodness, discipline and knowledge," expresses this reverence for truth. While UST has grown to become a mid-size comprehensive university, it remains profoundly committed to offering a Catholic, liberal arts education in the Basilian tradition: we are Catholic, we are classical, and we are cosmopolitan.

Catholic liberal arts education has a long, illustrious history. In the United States more than 220 institutions of higher learning are heirs to this tradition and, among them, a small number—perhaps twenty—are truly great Catholic universities. Alumni of Catholic colleges and universities treasure the distinctive characteristics of their education: the passion for truth, the complementarity of faith and reason, the commitment to the dignity of the human person, the ethical and moral implications of learning, the unique orientation given to all study by theology, and the value attributed to service of the Church and the community. Successful graduates of these institutions understand the Catholic vision of reality, possess high-level critical thinking skills, can speak and write clearly and effectively, are technologically competent and accustomed to work in teams, flexible in applying their knowledge, ethically and spiritually grounded, international in their outlook, prepared to live in a diverse society, civically engaged, willing to serve others, and have developed the habit of lifelong learning.

Conditions are promising for building a first-class Catholic university in the southern United States. The Catholic population is growing in the Southwest, and many recognize the value of an education committed to the liberal arts and to the ethical, intellectual, and spiritual heritage of Catholic higher education. We are the only provider of Catholic higher education in Houston, the nation's fourth largest city, and one of about twenty such institutions in the southern United States. We believe that the more faithful we are to our identity and mission, the more appealing we will be to a growing number of students. Our strategic planning process has motivated us to recapture the vitality of the University's original mission, to articulate and transmit our legacy, and to make UST's aspirations for the future clear and challenging.

We have decided that, within twenty-five years, we will become one of the great Catholic universities in America. Over the next five years we will take the first steps toward making this vision a reality.

Process

We launched our strategic planning initiative in the fall of 2002 with one straightforward goal: to develop a shared vision for the University's future. We solicited input from all areas of our institution: students, faculty, staff, administrators, alumni, directors, and external stakeholders. We collected and carefully considered more than 300 strategic issues in this process of shaping our future. During a two-day retreat, a cross-section of institutional stakeholders worked together to craft from the strategic issues nine major areas requiring our attention.

We then formulated these nine areas into charges, and work groups labored from January through May, 2003, to address them and eventually to formulate strategic recommendations. These work groups were composed of a broadly representative cluster of more than ninety members of the University community. Three times during this period, the work group chairs met with faculty, staff, and students in open campus meetings to present and test their thinking on these significant institutional concerns. With the same goals in mind, the work groups met with the executive committee and the board of directors in April, as well as with the stakeholder group in May. In addition, these work groups reported monthly to a broadly representative steering committee, on which the chair of each work group also served. During the remainder of the spring and summer the steering committee, together with the president, developed this strategic agenda from the work group reports. In addition, we also formulated a management agenda in order to ensure that the University implement best practices of higher education across

the institution. In August and September the strategic agenda and management agenda were presented to the faculty and staff and later at an open campus meeting. Final revisions were approved by the steering committee.

Throughout this process, we have looked externally at the educational, demographic, market, political, and social environment and internally at the campus community. As a result of this process we have discerned the call to become a great Catholic university, one genuinely worthy of America's fourth largest city and recognized as such.

Environment

As an institution of higher learning we have many strengths. From its founding in 1947, the University of St. Thomas has advanced a clearly defined educational mission as an institution "born from the heart of the Church." We are a diverse and welcoming community, a truly Catholic institution molded by our Basilian heritage. We are a mid-size comprehensive university that remains student-centered. Because of our size, we are nimble and able to take appropriate risks in response to today's market demands. We have a sound philosophy of education grounded in the Catholic intellectual tradition of dialogue between faith and reason, and we offer attractive, high-caliber academic programs. Our location as the gateway to Houston's Museum District and close to the Texas Medical Center and downtown serves well the graduate and non-traditional students enrolled in our evening classes. Likewise, the beautiful campus of our School of Theology at St. Mary's Seminary is well situated and equipped to meet the needs of our students. We make good and increasing use internally of instructional technology, are successfully engaged in a capital campaign with a goal of \$65 million, have a sound technological infrastructure base, a recently developed campus master plan, and newly constructed classroom, parking, residence life, and student life facilities. The expert and dedicated teaching as well as the scholarly expertise and availability of our professors to students are complemented by a committed, professional staff and administration and a supportive board of directors. We have in place a structure of shared governance and a solid foundation upon which to build a stronger collaborative and collegial ethos.

We are not without our weaknesses, however. We have not given our identity and mission sufficient clarity and projection either internally or externally, and the number of Basilians on campus is declining. As we have increased in size and complexity, our desire for collegial deliberation and open communication has not always kept pace with this growth. Many alumni have not developed a strong sense of identification with their *alma mater*. We have not

offered our students enough co-curricular programming and services integrated with their academic pursuits. Nor have we instilled in them an enthusiastic University spirit and love for campus traditions. Indeed, the attention given to developing and sustaining such traditions has been sporadic and inconsistent. Until recently, residential accommodations for our student body were insufficient. Our core curriculum is broad and distinctive—admirably inclusive of the liberal arts and sciences—but it needs more integration, coherence, and a clear statement of its goals and expected outcomes. In line with the increasing public and government demands for assessment and accountability, we need to devote greater attention to outcomes assessment across the University. We must also develop a more effective system for regular evaluation of faculty and for promotion and tenure requirements that satisfactorily addresses the relative roles of teaching, scholarly and creative activities, and service. We lack widespread local, regional, and national name recognition and the prestige attached to such recognition. Opportunities for significant expansion on our Museum District campus are limited. Some facilities are outdated, and others need to be built. Major challenges still exist in providing and using technology for administrative and instructional purposes. We lack consensus on the extent to which we should foster distributed learning. We face escalating costs and resource constraints, and our dependence on tuition revenue makes us highly sensitive to the demands of the market, which could tempt us to compromise our mission.

Yet external opportunities abound. We are the only Catholic university in Houston and one of seven in the Southwest. We are benefiting from the enhanced visibility and reputation of our current academic programs, and many students and families desire our person-centered and faith-based education. Positive demographic trends for UST exist locally, regionally, and nationally in the general college-age populations. In the Greater Houston Area, the increase in Hispanic and Asian-American college-age students, with a large percentage of Catholics in both groups and with whom we already have solid experience, favors undergraduate enrollment growth. We can leverage the ethnic diversity of the broader community to diversify our faculty and staff. Houston is weathering current economic difficulties with more ease than many other areas of the country. Our surrounding neighborhood is gentrifying, and opportunities still exist for further property acquisition. Public transportation and highway developments are improving access to the campus. Proximity to technical, business, medical, and educational institutions allows us to leverage old partnerships and develop new alliances. Sophisticated and increasingly available technologies provide more opportunities for our students, and we have possibilities for collaboration in expanding our technological capabilities. We are now more intentional in seeking external funding sources and pursuing grant opportunities to enhance our facilities, curriculum, and scholarship programs.

Nevertheless, we face real threats. We are insufficiently known by enough prospective students, including Catholic high school graduates and their families, especially those desiring independent and faith-based higher education. Increasingly stiff competition for our graduate programs, especially in business, is coming from traditional and non-traditional institutions that deliver their services on-line, on-site, and at Houston satellite locations. Demand for on-line education and advanced technology is increasing across all populations of students UST serves. As Houston's economy recovers, the availability of competing staff benefit and compensation packages will also increase. While demographic projections indicate growth in markets favorable to us, a high percentage of this college-age population will be less able to afford private education without considerable financial assistance and will be less academically prepared for university-level study. At the same time, we face a decline in funding for need-based federal (Pell) and state grants (TEG) among other programs, increased reliance on student loan programs, possible cutbacks from employers on their tuition reimbursement programs, the mounting complexity of employer, governmental, regulatory, and accreditation demands, and a stock market decline that has adversely affected grant-making foundations, philanthropic giving, and our endowment.

Vision

Strategic planning and strategic management give us the opportunity, as wise stewards of our heritage, to respond to our internal and external environments and to explore avenues for enhancing our attractiveness, performance, and reputation in service of the Church and the community of Houston, the southern United States, and the nation. In short, ***we have embraced a commitment to become a great Catholic university with a focus on undergraduate education*** and to take the steps necessary to prepare for and hand over such an institution to the next generation.

The great Catholic university we envision has the following distinguishing traits: fidelity to the Church's tradition of learning and scholarship; a vibrant sacramental and liturgical life; an academically superior student body; high retention and graduation rates; widespread participation in undergraduate research and service learning; exemplary levels of success in admission to advanced professional and graduate study; committed engagement in student life, especially leadership activities; nearly all faculty with terminal degrees; a community with a majority of its full-time freshmen and sophomores living on campus; a faculty distinguished by its love for teaching, scholarship and creative works; an endowment of at least three times the size of its annual operating budget; a majority of alumni who give annually; sound financials and bond rating; and a widely recognized reputation for excellence.

Strategic Initiatives

Our vision of building a great Catholic university for the future entails making a firm commitment in the present. Over the next five years we will lay the foundations of our vision by focusing on four strategic initiatives that will guide all our activity. We will therefore:

- 1. Assert our identity, academic brand, and image as a Catholic university imbued with the Basilian tradition.***
- 2. Strengthen the academic excellence of our faculty and students and the quality of a UST education.***
- 3. Build a more engaged campus community as we increase undergraduate enrollment.***
- 4. Invigorate and expand our relationships with alumni, external stakeholders, and the community.***

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- 1. We will assert our identity, academic brand, and image as a Catholic university imbued with the Basilian tradition.***

We will so value and strengthen our Catholic identity, academic brand, and image based on the Basilian tradition that these characteristics will permeate all our actions and influence all our decisions. We will link these traits to all our initiatives and our position in the marketplace. In order gain recognition as a great Catholic university, a goal that may well take a generation to accomplish, we will need to project externally a focused sense of who we are. We must communicate our distinctive traits forcefully and repeatedly, and we must live them convincingly.

We will articulate clearly the meaning of a Catholic education at the University of St. Thomas, our history and Basilian heritage, and our identity and mission. We will develop a plan for transmitting the essential contents of such a manifesto to students, faculty, staff, administrators, and board members. As we engage in these activities we will be attentive to the University's tradition of respecting the contributions of those from all faith traditions.

We will establish the goals, objectives, outcomes, and measures of evaluation of our distinctive core curriculum, one of the nation's most rigorous in its philosophy and theology requirements and most inclusive of the liberal arts and sciences. We will draw up and communicate to the public a statement of the educational outcomes expected of our graduates and measure our students' success in achieving them.

We will refine our academic programs, campus culture, and institutional activity so as to provide an experience that responds to our defined market niche. In compelling fashion we will express our Catholic identity and mission, our commitment to excellence in our programs, faculty and students, and the interdisciplinarity of our undergraduate curriculum.

We will regularly provide experiences that convey our identity and dedication to the Catholic ideals and principles of higher education, and our Basilian heritage to the campus community and other constituencies, including prospective students and their families, parishes, educational institutions of all levels, businesses, and community and religious leaders.

We will position ourselves in our markets intentionally and wisely. We will market the distinctive Catholic identity and core values of the University of St. Thomas to increase our local, national, and international recognition. We will increase the enrollment and quality of our undergraduate students and, at the graduate level, we will concentrate on improving the quality of our students and programs. We will take steps to move to a regional and, within a generation, to a national market for attracting outstanding undergraduate students. At the same time we will maintain a predominantly local market for our graduate students, adding new delivery systems and formats such as weekend, summer, off-campus, and targeted Web-based programs to meet the needs of these markets and to optimize the use of existing campus facilities.

We will draw up a comprehensive and integrated University-wide marketing plan that embodies our Catholic values, supports our enrollment goals, fosters greater recognition by prospective students and the public at large, promotes student engagement, and strengthens our reputation and prestige in the Houston area and beyond. We will also define, develop, and market our strengths as a diverse academic community unified by its spirit of inquiry, love of knowledge, and respect for religious and moral truths.

2. ***Strengthen the academic excellence of our faculty and students and the quality of a UST education.***

We will commit ourselves to achieving academic excellence, especially by enhancing the academic qualifications and measurable outcomes of all our students, our academic programs, and the teaching skills and scholarly activity of our faculty.

To become a great Catholic university and to live up to our mission and heritage, we must develop more exceptional undergraduate programs focused on the regional and national market. Aware of our stewardship responsibilities and relying on empirical data and other relevant information, we will monitor the academic excellence of our *foundation programs*—the existing programs that constitute the bases of our undergraduate education; of our *signature programs*—our hallmarks of academic excellence; and of our *gateway programs*—those that prepare graduates for careers directly related to their academic discipline.

We will strengthen with targeted resources our undergraduate signature programs. We will develop and offer innovative, interdisciplinary, and cutting-edge programs that none or few of our competitors offer, our *pioneer programs*.

We will ensure that our graduate programs are of high quality and relevance to the primarily local student body they will serve in the next five years. While the Center for Thomistic Studies is a signature program with a national and international reputation, most of our graduate programs will likely be of the gateway or pioneer kind.

The gateway and pioneer programs for graduates and undergraduates should consider the opportunities offered by UST's proximity to Houston's major business districts, museums, and the Texas Medical Center in order to enrich current programs or develop additional ones.

We will develop an applied, integrated technology plan in cooperation with the faculty, staff, administration, students, and board of directors. This plan will recognize, encourage, and support faculty in their efforts to create technology-enhanced learning opportunities and courses in a manner consistent with the various disciplines and the University's mission.

The excellence of our programs will continue to hinge on one-to-one engagement between faculty and students and the academic leadership of our faculty. We will take great care to improve the academic qualifications of our entering students, integrate the core curriculum,

foster learner-centered teaching, and advance our undergraduate research and service learning programs. We will be intentional in hiring, developing, evaluating, promoting, and tenuring faculty committed to our mission and to academic excellence.

We will identify academic and non-academic centers of excellence throughout the University and give them high fiscal priority. We will elaborate a methodology to evaluate and prioritize all academic programs in light of their strengths, weaknesses, sources of revenue, and costs. We will identify weak programs and assess whether they can or should be revitalized. We will earmark portions of both new revenue streams and future tuition increases for these centers of excellence. In addition, we will establish a grant resource office at the University to assist faculty and schools in enhancing their academic excellence by applying for and securing grants and other financial awards that will support current programs or develop new initiatives.

3. ***We will build a more engaged campus community as we increase our undergraduate enrollment.***

We will foster community and collegial spirit among students, faculty, and staff in all academic and co-curricular activities. To provide the infrastructure for a great Catholic university, we will both increase the enrollment and improve the quality of our incoming freshman class.

We will build a more engaged campus community that will be attractive to both our residential and non-residential students. We will establish among the undergraduate student body small, active collegiate communities that link students with faculty, staff, and administrators in mutually supportive relationships. These communities will celebrate and foster the emergence of UST traditions, serve as centers for academic and social interaction and curricular and co-curricular programs, and encourage student and alumni engagement.

We will cultivate a campus culture that inspires strong attachment to UST among our students throughout their University career, a loyalty that will guarantee strong ties as alumni. We will initiate and promote lifelong learning for alumni and friends by developing appropriate self-supporting cultural and intellectual activities such as study abroad learning opportunities. We will foster the active cooperation of the offices of academic and student affairs as strategic partners in programming activities, civic engagement, service learning, and student leadership development. Undergraduate

research will remain a hallmark of student-faculty engagement at UST.

Since a critical mass of resident students characterizes all great American colleges and universities, we will plan and develop a more residential campus to support a growing regional and national student body.

Even as we build an engaged campus strengthened by collegiate communities, we will focus our efforts on undergraduate enrollment growth by intentionally increasing the number of first-time freshman students from local, regional, and national markets and by taking greater steps to retain them. We will assess the characteristics of our entering students so that we can better assist them in succeeding at the University, and we will regularly monitor their academic progress. We will improve our retention and graduation rates with a series of effective academic, student life, and other support programs designed to retain all students.

To promote superior academic achievement and greater student engagement, we will renovate and appropriately equip classrooms, labs, learning spaces, and recreational facilities, make needed infrastructure upgrades, and plan for, and build if necessary, additional on-campus residential facilities.

4. ***We will invigorate and expand our relationships with alumni, external stakeholders, and the community.***

In laying the foundation for becoming a great Catholic university, we will extend the influence of our mission beyond the boundaries of our campus, faculty, and students by creating cooperative relationships that sustain our service to the Catholic, local, and wider community.

We will encourage our alumni to play a more active role in recruiting new students and supporting current students through mentoring, arranging internships, and philanthropy. We will maintain a close relationship among our students, our faculty and staff, and our alumni through special programs and events.

We will cultivate partnerships with local corporations, nonprofit organizations, and professional societies so that we can support the educational and professional development requirements of their employees. Through our outreach programs we will provide our students

with internships, scholarships, and financial support. Our professional development and select continuing education programs will differentiate the University from its local competitors and other providers in the broader market.

We will invigorate our partnerships with the Greater Houston Area Catholic and public schools, community colleges, and other educational institutions, and we will develop new collaborative programs and alliances with Houston-area colleges and universities.

We will select and cultivate relations with international, regional, and local community leaders in our city, and we will identify specific cultural and ethnic communities with which we can formally institutionalize affiliations.

We will investigate ways to increase our service to the Diocese of Galveston-Houston and other Texas dioceses, and we will foster alliances with both formal and informal Catholic entities, especially with those organizations having a cultural or academic orientation. In particular, we will consider how to design events, programs, initiatives, and curricula that are attractive to these constituencies and advance the University's mission.

Next Steps

To realize our vision of becoming a great Catholic university, we will develop a detailed list of tasks, capital and operating budgets, revenue sources, priorities, responsible parties, and timelines. This operational planning will begin in the fall of 2003, with implementation in the 2004/2005 academic year. The president and steering committee will lead the implementation of this agenda and the tasks required to execute it. They will create evaluation systems to assess progress toward our goals, and they will report regularly to the campus community, board, and external stakeholders, including educational, business, and Church and community leaders. The steering committee and president will also ensure that the process of scanning our environment begun in the fall of 2002, assessing strategic issues, and developing strategies for updating the University's vision and operational plan will continue.

We will make every effort to be counted, within a generation, among America's great Catholic universities. We are convinced that we should aspire to this goal and that, with God's help, we will achieve it.

MANAGEMENT AGENDA

In addition to implementing the strategic agenda, the University will also take immediate steps to ensure the implementation of best practices in higher education throughout the institution.

We will develop an integrated plan of quality enhancement for our operational and functional processes in order better to steward our resources and ensure success in building an academically excellent and engaged campus. We will:

- focus on quality across all levels—faculty, staff, and administration;
- align processes with both the University’s mission and constituent satisfaction;
- benchmark data tied to quality indicators and evaluation results that will drive planning, budgeting, and continuous process improvement for each program, office, department, and division;
- foster a culture of cross-functional, team-based problem solving; and
- provide for continuous training and professional education for all personnel.

We will design a transparent process that identifies where major budget allocations and decisions are made. We will find ways to streamline our decision-making so that innovative proposals requiring financial commitments can be dealt with swiftly.

We will strive to make sound decisions quickly, and we will promote a high level of internal cooperation throughout the campus community among faculty, staff, administrators, students, alumni, and board members. In all common endeavors we will foster a strong sense of ownership of the University’s ideals, programs, and initiatives. We will communicate openly and clearly so that all members of the community are informed of the University’s activities and internal workings.

We will articulate more clearly the roles of deans, chairs, and directors, and encourage greater collaboration among them. We will review all University committees in light of their composition and membership criteria, charge and responsibilities, frequency of meetings, effectiveness, decision reporting mechanisms, and decision routing mechanisms.

We will establish a coordinated program for training and developing current staff, faculty, and administrators in technology, professional skills, University policies and operations,

and professional development. We will collaboratively design faculty and staff evaluation processes that foster improved performance and promote our vision of becoming a great Catholic university.

We will regularly review our faculty and staff salary and benefits structure to ensure our competitiveness in the various marketplaces. With the goal of more closely reflecting parity with our student body, we will be deliberate in the hiring and retention of ethnically diverse faculty, staff, and administrators committed to our mission.