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Collaboration, Commitment, and Communication: Tales from the Road of Continuous Performance Improvement

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Introduction: Performance in Higher Education

As a Sister of Mercy and president of Salve Regina University in Newport, Rhode Island, I am pleased to engage in a conversation about the changing realities in higher education and the success of Salve Regina University. I have served as the university president for fifteen years and look forward to assuming responsibilities as chancellor in July 2009.

Performance in higher education is strongly tied to accountability—accountability that goes beyond financial matters and includes assessment of academic achievement. Society should and does demand that young people attending an institution of higher education be challenged and that the transmission of knowledge is real and effective. The accumulation of knowledge, not information, is key to successful academic achievement. Institutions of higher education have a further responsibility to teach students how to use information in an interconnected, logical, and ethical way.

The demands of accountability, both from the faculty and from the institution, are critical performance requirements for the higher education industry. In the past, institutional performance or success was very often measured by endowment, the number of student applications, the rate of matriculation from that application pool, and the graduation rate. I think higher education has moved far beyond that for a real assessment of performance.

Each institution has its own defined mission. Over and above the general challenges of performance in higher education, meeting the aspirations of the institution's stated mission is noteworthy. Salve Regina University has always been known for academic excellence and integrity. It is also an institution that strongly promotes community and is anchored in the traditions of the Sisters of Mercy. The university mission clearly states that we accept persons of all religious beliefs and that our primary work is to seek wisdom, promote universal justice, and encourage students to work for a world that is harmonious, just, and merciful. These are challenging performance goals to measure. Salve Regina University has been effective in the integration of its mission, not only into the lives of the faculty and staff, but also into the lives of our students. The measurement of that success has

been the way that the university's culture has been carried forward into the lives of our graduates. The positive Salve Regina mission inspired contributions they have made to their communities and professions are noteworthy.

Higher Education and New Business Realities

I firmly believe that higher education, while valuing and promoting collegiality and collaboration, is administered much like a business. Institutions of higher education with modest endowments are tuition-dependent and must serve the students (customers) well, keep our tuition (price) right, and pay our faculty (employees) a just wage.

Higher education is an extremely competitive industry with high human resource costs. The competitive environment has placed increasing demands on every institution. Students and their parents shop for safety, comfort, convenience and value, in addition to high academic standards. These are costly and challenging expectations. To meet these demands, institutions of higher education employ many of the management principles applied in businesses. For example, a strong and well-integrated planning process contributes significantly to the success of any business. This is also true in higher education. Institutions of higher education have the added challenge of integrating a planning process that must be driven by the academic program and supported by every administrative unit.

Performance improvement in the academics is given top priority in long-range planning at Salve Regina University. Planning flows from the foundation of the mission and stated visions and goals. With improved educational performance as the focus, decisions related to the operating budget, long-range campus development, personnel, and financing are made after extensive discussion of timing and priorities as related to the academic program and student needs. This has resulted in success at Salve Regina. All members of the university have been involved in the planning process and kept abreast of ongoing developments. As a result, the university has been able to make bold changes in response to new and evolving realities in social and technological advances. Timely adaptability and flexibility is a new requirement in higher education. Rather than considering change in a slow deliberative way, as has been done in the past,

the ability to make change in a timely manner can be critical to the performance and financial well-being for an institution of higher education. Salve Regina University has been responsive to the changing environment. While remaining true to the liberal arts tradition, the reality of students embarking on multiple careers in their lifetime has been embraced and effectively incorporated in professional programs and supporting courses. A strong, well-planned, redesigned core curriculum ensures a broad-based education in the liberal arts for every graduate. While well prepared for their chosen profession, every student is prepared to be responsive to changing societal and economic realities.

Recent Change

In recent years, there has been a notable increase in the demand for internationalization of the curriculum in higher education. At the same time, expectations for immediate employment upon graduation run high. Internationalization of the curriculum goes far beyond providing study-abroad opportunities for students. It requires the inclusion of topics related to ethnicity, diversity, religion, and culture integrated into courses throughout the university curriculum. This is challenging, but it has been done quite well at Salve Regina University.

The commitment to a global vision in the educational process was achieved through the planning process and the commitment to continuous improvement as an institution. Members of the university community have been successfully engaged in the planning process and discussion of the mission “to encourage students to work for a world that is harmonious, just and merciful.” This has resulted in a campus culture with a welcoming spirit and people continually challenging themselves to reach the level of performance inspired by the university mission statement. The commitment to the mission of the university and to the strategic planning process has permeated every department. This, along with the spirit of continuous performance improvement, have motivated departments to respond effectively not only to internationalization of the curriculum, but also to the expansion of opportunities that enrich the student experience. These experiences prepare them well for immediate job placement with the reality that in a global economy they may embark on multiple careers in their lifetime.

Best Practices for Improving Performance

Best practices for improving performance are collaboration and cooperation. When considering decisions that involve persons from various departments, receiving feedback from those involved has been one of my best practices. The result has been that, while there may not be a consensus on the matter, I have a sense of the direction that is acceptable, and I have a framework for long-range thinking. Using information provided by persons from each area involved, and their data, helps inform what I am attempting to achieve. The collective intelligence is rich and effective. Asking the right question is also important. In a group discussion I often ask, “Should we be asking this question in a different way? Is there a different question we should be asking regarding this situation?”.

Collaboration has been most helpful to meeting the goals of my institution. I cannot speak generally in regard to other institutions, but at Salve Regina University this has been a good process and has contributed to fewer department silos. Rather than being in silos, the community is like the wheat in the field; cross-pollination is ongoing.

Common Performance Challenges

How to best foster the collaborative spirit and be responsive to society in a timely manner are among the many challenges for higher education. Another challenge has to do with image. Every organization has a public image, whether Ford Motor Company, McDonald’s, or a higher education institution. The planning process must include the questions, “How are we perceived?” and “What is considered our niche?”. As performance objectives are set, these questions need to be considered and honestly answered.

Salve Regina University is a young, emerging institution with strong academic programs and a beautiful location in a historic environment. How to promote the institution so that the strength of the academic program is most prominent—more so than our unique location and our beautiful campus—is

an ongoing process. The principle that the student's educational experience is central to all development is the image Salve Regina wants to promote. If measured by performance, I believe the usual measures, such as graduation rates and yield rates and so forth, are not so much of a concern. Being known as an institution that has the student's educational experience at the heart of everything is a greater challenge.

Addressing Challenges

The Salve Regina community addresses societal challenges through discussions across departments on different topics. A number of efforts have been in process on the campus for the last several years: a group of faculty and staff read the same book and meet to discuss it; a faculty group conducts a discussion focused on diversity with representatives from different departments; a symposium and publication that resulted from a consideration of the concept of mercy and how it is integrated in academic disciplines was initiated. As far as possible, the collaborative spirit is used to consider different topics. Whether the issue is related to academics or society in general, people from different academic disciplines and staff from different departments talk together about those issues and those challenges.

To help meet the challenges of globalization, Salve Regina University worked with the U.S. Congress to establish the Pell Center for International Relations and Public Policy on the campus. It was established to honor Senator Claiborne Pell who served for thirty-six years in the U.S. Senate and is well known for his support of education, the arts, culture, and his contributions to international relations. The lectures, workshops and symposia that the center sponsors are integrated into the curriculum and are wonderful enrichment opportunities for our students.

The Leadership Role

It has been my role as president of the university to be the visionary, to see what needs to be completed in the next five years, sometimes ten. It has been my responsibility to point out those things and to initiate the implementation of steps toward the attainment of defined objectives. Once that has happened, while I may provide leadership, it has been important for me to recognize that others must take up the initiative and complete the

task. I strived to maintain communication, but not control of details. If an organization's leader is too intimately involved, the creativity and active commitment of others are suppressed. I have tried to convey that I have trust in and am dependent on the good performance of others to attain the objectives I have set out or to complete a project that has been defined. A sense of trust in the employee is important to communicate at all times.

During my presidency I have tried to maintain consistency and predictability about the way I act and the way I make decisions. Also, if I expect collaboration among the departments, then I need to be a collaborator. Setting a good leadership example and instilling it in my senior administrators, asking them to maintain a collaborative spirit, were important. Because of strong leadership at several levels of management, all of the university's employees have a deep sense of dedication and commitment to the students, to the mission of promoting universal justice, and to seeking the truth, the goal of a successful educational institution.

Feedback, Communication, and Evaluation

An open system of communication is an essential characteristic of a good university. I receive and respond to e-mail from students, from faculty, and from staff. They make suggestions and, as is the case for every president, offer personal comments on my decisions. I believe in evaluations and active and timely feedback. I meet occasionally with the student government. A faculty assembly with an executive committee provides good communication with the faculty, as well as formal feedback to the president. Being visible and accessible and the establishment of a formal evaluation process have been important. I have also instituted a process whereby some administrators are involved in executive coaching. This is unusual in higher education. The board of trustees does an annual review of the president on agreed upon objectives.

Influence of Students

Students are incorporated into different committees throughout Salve Regina University. Their voices are heard. They influence and inform. They express their needs and their wants. The response is logical and thoughtful without compromising on principle.

Students influence the performance of faculty and administrators. As a student-centered institution, this is natural. It does not mean that compromises are made for students because they do not like to be challenged, or that conditions are made to be so comfy and rosy they do not know what the real world is all about. In a sense, what is offered students might be a little bit of “tough love.” Rules and regulations are enforced. Sometimes that is not accepted particularly well. However, we are a nation that is ruled by law, and I think it is part of our responsibility to teach students that rules and regulations are put in place for a purpose, and they are enforced until changed. By not properly educating students to conduct themselves accordingly, higher education will do a disservice to our students and our nation.

Factors in Success

A number of factors have contributed to the success of our university. One is that early in my tenure as president, I made the decision that we could not continue to grow and develop the core operations of the university by going about it in the way that academic institutions have done traditionally—that is, by taking a long time to make a decision. Given the changing economic climate in higher education and the rapid changes in society and technology, academia must change the way decisions have been made. I instituted a process of planning and decision-making that not only involved the community, but also moved the community to a decision quickly. Because of that, this institution has been able to be responsive to the students and make adjustments in our culture to meet needs both educationally and socially.

The change in the speed of making a decision has resulted in major improvements in performance during recent years. Enrollment targets have been met; facilities have been improved; the endowment has grown; two major capital campaigns have been completed; young and talented faculty have been recruited; and well-prepared students have applied for admission. By becoming a bit more flexible about the way we did things and how we arrived at decisions, the general status and recognition of the university were expanded and improved.

Measuring Success

Strategic planning is done in five-year cycles at Salve Regina University. From the five-year plan, every department is required to develop a three-year action plan. Twice a year every division reports on the action steps in relation to what was proposed to be accomplished. Measuring our progress twice a year has been quite effective. The status of actions required to meet stated objectives is known in every department. It is a regular measuring process for the strategic plan and helps the university keep pace with our rapidly changing society.

Second, we have made a commitment to a campus-wide assessment process. Overall assessment is part of the culture of the institution. The institution is not so much concerned about benchmarking against other institutions; Salve Regina strives to create new standards of excellence. Our plan is known. If our five-year objectives are realized, performance has then in fact, been good, and the university is successful.

Upcoming Plans for Improvement

Continuous improvement is the norm at Salve Regina University. Rather than talking about efficiency, continuous improvement is our goal, whether in information technology, facilities, the English department, or the art department. As long as the institution is on the road of continuous improvement, I believe that performance is acceptable. There is always room for improvement. This is the mantra at our university. Whether you are in the business office planning a new billing process, or in an academic department looking at your student evaluations, at Salve Regina University you are constantly trying to improve yourself and the job that you do.

I am pleased with the progress, spirit and culture of Salve Regina University. But there are always challenges to be met. For instance, I have activated or reactivated several committees to focus particularly on student retention. We have had very good enrollment and a good graduation rate. However, I have noticed that there is a general overall lack of commitment by students in recent years. Young people today appear to want more flexibility and choice in education. Some choose to spend time at one school, move to another, and sometimes return to the school previously

attended. How do we get a sense of commitment going on the students' part—a commitment to their team, a commitment to their club, a commitment to their school? How to build strong, lasting relationships is an important lesson to learn. Evidence that we have good practices in place to help the young people learn how to develop good relationships would strongly enhance our image.

With the information age and given the technology available, there is less and less direct interaction among young people. Two or three students communicating regularly, face-to-face, is unusual. Most often that communication is done by text messaging or e-mail. Part of a measure of success and performance will be whether we see students talking to each other more often and texting less. Students walking together and speaking to each other as well as spending more time speaking with faculty members directly, rather than just by e-mail, is most desirable. Increase direct human interaction is what I personally would like to see at Salve Regina in the next several years.

A native of Rhode Island, Dr. M. Therese Antone, RSM was appointed president of Salve Regina University in 1994. Sister Therese earned a bachelor's degree from Salve Regina University, a master's degree in mathematics from Villanova University, and a Doctor of Education with an emphasis in administration, planning, and social policy from Harvard University. She completed the Senior Executive Program at the MIT Sloan School of Management.

Sister Therese's career has included teaching at all levels and serving as principal of a coeducational secondary school and director of finance and secondary education for the Sisters of Mercy serving in Rhode Island and Central America. She has served as faculty member, director of development, and executive vice president for corporate affairs and advancement at Salve Regina University.

Sister Therese has served on many boards and committees, including the Finance Council of the Diocese of Providence. Among those she currently serves are: chair, Blue Hen Investment Company; board of directors, AAA Southern New England; board of trustees, BankNewport; board of advisers, U.S. Naval War College; board of directors, Lifespan Corporation; Commission on Women in Higher Education of the American Council on

Education; board of advisers, Newport County Fund of the Rhode Island Foundation; board of directors, Beacon Mutual Insurance Company; and board of directors, Redwood Library. In addition to many other honors and awards, Sister Therese was the 1998 recipient of the National Conference Humanitarian Award, the 1998 John E. Fogarty Achievement Award, and the Mercy Higher Education Leadership Award. Sister Therese is also a 2006 inductee to the Rhode Island Heritage Hall of Fame. In March 2007, Sister Therese was a Fulbright Senior Specialist at Krasnoyarsk State University in Russia.



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