

Realizing the Distinctive University: Vision and Values, Strategy and Culture

reviewed by Jacob Rooksby – December 11, 2017

Title: Realizing the Distinctive University: Vision and Values, Strategy and Culture

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Books containing reflections and advice of retired university administrators fall within a difficult genre. On the one hand, some will become classics when their authors impart lessons learned from the Ivy League and other elegant institutions. On the other, less famous authors from less-renowned institutions risk being portrayed as provincial or self-celebratory. Ambition aside, not every university administrator can be Clark Kerr (2001), Bartlett Giamatti (1990), or Derek Bok (2015).

What Mark Roche offers in his new book, *Realizing the Distinctive University*, is both personal and profound, reflective and progressive. Current and aspiring administrators, from institutions of all types, will find this book thought-provoking and useful, surpassing in its incisiveness even Rosovsky's (1991) well-worn classic from nearly three decades ago.

Professor Roche's story is one of the reluctant administrator, a productive "INTJ" (in Myers-Briggs parlance) faculty member at Ohio State and later Notre Dame, called into administrative service early in his career by the opportunity to help an institution realize its untapped potential. In a world where many view academic leadership as broken, Roche makes a forceful case for the centrality of *vision* to the successful administrator. He describes the innate habits of a leader who cannot help himself ("We can and will make this place better!"), as opposed to one who wants only to help himself. Therein lies all the difference.

His brief account of the history of American higher education, in Chapter Two, is perhaps the best pithy rendering of the subject in recent times, effectively condensing what Cole (2010) painstakingly explains in over five-hundred pages. This chapter alone should be required reading for new members of the academy. Roche's understanding of German history helps considerably in his telling of how American higher education emerged into global prominence after World War II. But the proliferation of our institutions has led to the problem with which Roche wrestles in subsequent chapters: How should an administrator chart an effective course through an educational landscape that is so crowded yet sprawling, and in many ways, homogenous?

Enter the role of the administrator driven by vision, not commitment to exalting history, pushing paper, or maintaining the status quo. In Chapter Three, Roche defines a three-stage process that academic leaders of vision should follow: first, articulate a compelling vision; second, identify gaps between the vision and reality, offering strategies to bridge the gap; and third, give progress reports on one's way to achieve the vision. Roche, who began his career on faculty and later as a department chair at Ohio State, intersperses examples of his vision for enhancing the liberal arts education at Notre Dame, which by all accounts he was successful in doing during his 11-year tenure as Dean of Notre Dame's College of Arts and Letters. Recognizing that change is difficult to attain, in part because most institutions move at a tectonic pace, Roche's assessment of the typologies of academic leaders seems particularly apt. Some avoid controversy because they are overly concerned with being liked. Others avoid it because they have ambitious career goals beyond their present positions. Fewer are willing to take the heat because they are committed to improving the institution. No leader falls within any one description all the time, but the reader quickly gets the sense that for Roche, fulfillment of vision, not cultivating friendship or enhancing his career, was always the prize.

Successive chapters delve more into the (occasionally unglamorous) details of the life of the modern academic administrator. In an environment where few academics seem to understand the importance of money in fueling academic operations, Chapter Four details how money can further vision. In this chapter Roche offers practical advice about creating and deploying academic-related endowments, as well as shares stories of fundraising done well at Notre Dame.

Chapter Five tackles the importance of flexibility for administrators. Most problems they face do not have readymade solutions, and good leadership requires the creativity and freedom to meet the needs of the organization, even if that means exploring paths that initially seem unorthodox, even heretical, to those colleagues highly influenced by past practices. Whether it be juggling a phased retirement, incentivizing research productivity, or convincing capable talent of taking on the role of department chair, Roche provides not just relevant examples, but also workable solutions.

He also discusses the role of competition, in Chapter Six, both between and within universities, while Chapter Seven addresses the related role of incentives. In these pages, Roche describes how to foster healthy competition between departments by deploying tenure lines, research support, and other perquisites in traditional and even counterintuitive ways. He reminds readers that true distinction entails a commitment to both difference and greatness, and too often administrators are willing to sacrifice the latter.

With respect to rankings, Roche reveals his thinking that it is better to be distinctive than highly ranked (although the two do tend to correlate). Without turning back on the university's pursuit of the public good, he supports a market-based view of its operations. Markets breed competition and drive the best institutions to excel. He is unapologetic about their positive effects, which may irritate some humanists, but I found his analysis here to be nuanced.

Chapter Eight deals with accountability, and may be the most useful of the book's latter chapters dealing with practices. Administrators will agree with his assessment that "An outside person with new ideas is not always a welcome combination" (p. 222), in part because outsiders are more concerned with accountability, i.e. results, than responsibility, or who is charged with what. This comprehensive chapter considers a variety of important topics, including addressing student expectations, conducting administrative reviews, and fairly evaluating faculty teaching, a perennially touchy subject. In a candid assessment of his own strengths and weaknesses, Roche explains the hazards of criticizing too much and praising too little. The chapter concludes with an appropriate reminder that there is no academic side of the university that sits alongside a business side: only an academic core and a support side.

Effective academic leadership entails developing a vision and managing others to help achieve it, but it also requires fostering community, as Chapter Nine explores. Here Roche examines the social and emotional dimensions of the workplace, noting how traditions can root positively, or negatively, in the culture of an institution. While negative traditions waste time and energy, positive ones help build a healthy sense of collective identity. Institutions with strong residential programs and frequent faculty-student interactions, like Notre Dame, have advantages in this realm. He also mentions athletics, but does not overstate the example.

Roche's book depicts a persuasive alternative to the career administrator, that bureaucratic hybrid in vogue at many institutions of less distinction than Notre Dame, where leadership is fungible and vision beside the point. The book falls short only in selling itself short: the concluding chapter focuses too narrowly on humdrum issues Roche now faces as a member of Notre Dame's faculty, retired from the deanship. I would have preferred that Roche speak to the book's themes in larger context at the end, firmly placing his contributions within the canon of works of this kind, where it belongs. Instead it ends on a parochial note, which seems incongruent for a book of otherwise lofty ambition and broad application. Regardless, *Realizing the Distinctive University* should quickly become essential reading for modern administrators seeking to challenge institutions to become both different and great.

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