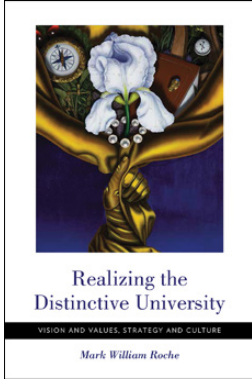


## BOOK REVIEW

# Realizing the Distinctive University

## Vision and Values, Strategy and Culture



by Mark William Roche  
 University of Notre Dame Press 2017  
 275 pages  
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**Reviewed by Chris Mayer**

AT A TIME WHEN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES are competing for declining numbers of high school graduates, receiving reduced state support, being criticized for high tuition, and facing a public that questions the value of higher education, Mark William Roche presents his thoughts on how institutions can thrive in this environment. He argues, “For a university to flourish, it needs to embrace a distinctive vision and instantiate or embody that vision in specific practices” (p. 4). According to Roche, many universities neglect to focus on the distinctiveness that will allow them to differentiate themselves from other institutions, which is necessary for them to flourish. Roche’s ideas in *Realizing the Distinctive University: Vision and Values, Strategy and Culture* are informed by his experience serving as dean of the College of Arts and Letters at the University of Notre Dame for 11 years.

In addition to his experience as a dean, Roche is a professor of German language and literature, and he draws on this expertise in the beginning of the book to discuss advances made by German universities starting at the end of the 18th century. He suggests that German universities gained distinctiveness and assumed a leading role in higher education because they moved from transmitting knowledge to discovering knowledge. In discussing this transformation,

he identifies five principles essential to the distinctiveness of the German university, including three unique aspects of the German university: the integration of research and teaching, academic freedom, and the idea of self-formation.

After explaining why German universities lost preeminence, Roche discusses the emergence of American universities during the second half of the 20th century and the reasons why this occurred, which include the prioritization of research, a residential experience that focuses on the whole student, and applied scholarship. From there, Roche provides the reader with the challenges currently facing American higher education, ranging from students not being prepared for college-level work to racial and socioeconomic attainment gaps to the high costs of a college degree. This provides the transition to the next chapter where Roche shifts from the general characteristics of American universities to how administrators can help their university realize its distinctiveness within the diverse American higher education space.

Roche claims, “Motivation is central to success in any enterprise. The most powerful motivation is identification with a vision” (p. 61). He proposes that visions are essential in attracting students, distinguishing one institution from another, bringing together the diverse components of an institution, setting priorities, and effectively allocating resources. One example he offers is how a vision can unify and provide direction to an institution like Notre Dame that has a triadic identity (residential liberal arts college, research university, and Catholic institution). Without a coherent vision, institutions have a tendency to drift, in many cases losing the distinctiveness that will allow them to thrive. Roche provides other examples of institutional

visions and discusses his experience in establishing a vision and the associated goals that guided the college he led during his more than 10 years as a dean. As the chapter ends, he discusses types of change, ranging from incremental to transformative. Although transformative change is the most difficult, Roche claims that it is “necessary for any university that wants to compete”; however, for transformative change to be successful, he argues that there must be “a compelling vision” (p. 79).

Because crafting an effective vision is difficult, Roche provides the reader with what he thinks are its essential aspects. Yet the real challenge is employing the vision to set the direction and priorities for an institution. Recognizing this, Roche offers numerous chapters on how to implement a vision, which makes the book especially helpful for higher education leaders seeking practical advice on implementing a vision and leading effectively. According to Roche, the key tools in implementing a vision are people, resources, and strategies and incentives. In terms of people, he emphasizes the importance of picking the right staff, developing effective orientation programs, and communicating. In terms of resources, he spends a good deal of time discussing what has increasingly consumed administrators’ time: fund-raising. He also explores developing a strategic plan and creating priorities. Finally, he identifies structures and strategies that can help advance a university toward its vision.

Roche employs a range of approaches throughout the book and covers a lot of ground as he moves from the historical to the contemporary, the theoretical to the practical, and the scholarly to the personal. He blends these topics together extremely well to create a coherent narrative. He reflects on the history of higher education in Germany and the United States to demonstrate the transformation of higher education over centuries and the unique characteristics of universities from these countries while highlighting contemporary challenges facing American higher education. He employs examples from other institutions, but relies mostly on his own reflections based on his experience serving as a dean for

over a decade. Roche also incorporates his personal journey as a faculty member at The Ohio State University where he reluctantly assumed the position of department chair, which set him on the path to becoming an administrator. The reader learns that upon arriving at the University of Notre Dame, Roche was again reluctant to assume an administrative position when encouraged to apply to become dean of the College of Arts and Letters. Humor is interspersed throughout the text to effectively convey insights about the challenges of being an administrator.

*Realizing the Distinctive University* is about change, improvement, and leadership in higher education. It provides the reader with the historical background necessary to understand why American education is the way it is and what challenges it faces over the coming decades. Roche is able to make the case that institutions, if they want to flourish in the future, need to be distinctive, with strong identities that set them apart from other institutions and unify the campus around a vision. His discussion on moving from the development of a vision to actually implementing it in the complex and often slow-moving organizations that are American colleges and universities is extremely helpful for aspiring or current higher education leaders. A common tension highlighted by Roche throughout the book is balancing the need for transformational change, which can be rapid and radical, with the recognition that “change tests community” (p. 260) and “it takes time to make substantial changes” (p. 2). With the ability to lead change that adapts and evolves institutions becoming a necessary skill for higher education leaders, *Realizing the Distinctive University* is incredibly useful for anyone serving or hoping to serve as an administrator.

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