University of St.Thomas

The Call of Innovation
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Creativity and Innovation

Creativity is the ability to conquer the status quo, imagine what does not exist, and dream a better future. Innovation elevates creativity by converting ideas into reality and providing value. If innovation is the ability to imagine and shape an exceptional future, then our founder, Archbishop Ireland, called us to set innovation as central to the St. Thomas mindset: "I seek no backward voyage across the sea of time; I will ever press forward. I believe that God intends the present to be better than the past, and the future to be better than the present."[1] Our founder's vision is both our history and our future. Innovation is in our DNA and will prove vital in defining what the next 10, 20, and 100 years will look like for the University of St. Thomas.

As Provost, I aim to make innovation one of the underlying impetuses propelling our efforts. Thirty years after we opened the Minneapolis campus and began our journey toward being a nationally recognized, comprehensive Catholic university, the spirit of innovation is more important than ever. On the one hand, the realities of higher education demand it. Simply put, there are fewer students,[2] affordability is a significant challenge for many families, the value of a college education is questioned, and advances on digital technologies are reshaping student expectations. On the other hand, this is not about innovation to survive; it is innovation to thrive.

Embracing innovation as both mindset and methodology will foster an intellectually vibrant community attracting increasing numbers of talented students and faculty. They, in turn, will reimagine processes and systems to be more adaptable, efficient, and better able to meet the evolving needs of our stakeholders. It will expand our reach and capacity and place us among the top tier Catholic universities in the country.

A Culture of Innovation

At the organizational level, a culture of innovation is one that continuously gives life to novel, value-added approaches. In the context of higher education, one of the indicators of success is the student experience. Thus, continuously enhancing the student experience should be a key goal if we desire to instill a culture of innovation.

But how does the University of St. Thomas do this in 2023? How do we encourage and build on the innovative thinking that is already present on campus? Because while innovation may be one of our founding principles, and while faculty and staff may be exceptionally innovative individuals, there is no assurance their innovative spirit will translate into organizational innovation. The genesis of organizational innovation is rarely spontaneous; rather, it requires scaffolding to unite the community around a shared purpose. That is why fostering an intentional culture of innovation and supporting it through organizational resources will be an important area of focus in the years to come.

The process must include time for the organization to consider itself and examine its aims, methods, and motivations. Such an institutional examen must be built on dialogue and debate, providing a supportive atmosphere that nurtures creative thinking and a willingness to swim against the current. Faculty, staff, and administrators must feel empowered and encouraged to experiment with unconventional approaches. And failure must be accepted – even cherished – as a normal outcome of experimentation. This implies embracing a risk-taking attitude that is uncommon in higher education. But as Aquinas reminds us, if the utmost purpose of a captain were to preserve his ship, he would never leave port.[3]

The ART of Innovation

Crafting a culture of organizational innovation in higher education does not happen overnight. Indeed, it requires a new mindset, persistence, and the application of a consistent methodology within the organization. I propose we employ a framework I have termed, Aspire-Reimagine-Transform (ART), shown in Exhibit 1. Under this approach, we first develop an *aspiration* of what we want to accomplish with a particular innovation (value-added); then we focus on *reimagining* how to accomplish the work (creativity); and finally, we *transform* the environment with the implementation of the innovation (change). In this framework, we are also
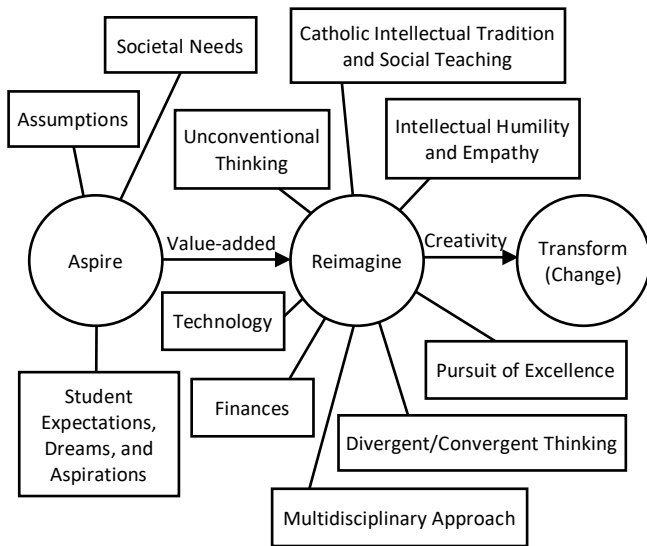
Exhibit 1: ART Framework

paying attention to streamlining and simplifying our operations to align resources with our priorities and ensure financial strength for years to come.

We have recently implemented this framework to realize a new graduate program, the Master of Arts in Diversity Leadership (MADL). We defined our *aspiration* as a desire to offer an accessible and affordable degree that will equip current and prospective leaders with the multidisciplinary knowledge and tools necessary to effectively implement diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts within their organizations. Then, we looked at traditional degrees to understand the current value proposition. Our *reimagined* offering called for breaking with tradition in several respects. Exhibit 2 contrasts a more traditional approach with our novel proposal for delivering such a degree. We became particularly creative regarding finances, which allowed us to cultivate a novel business model. Traditional degrees usually require new resources and rely significantly on fixed costs, but our proposal turned this assumption upside down by relying predominantly on variable costs. As such, administrative support is handled with the reallocation of existing resources (an endowed chair position) and faculty payments are based on overload compensation proportional to the number of students in a class. This approach effectively ensures that every class provides net revenue. This, in turn, allowed us to offer a much lower tuition rate than traditional programs. We then *transformed* the process by developing the degree.

Exhibit 2: Traditional vs. Novel Approach for the M.A. in Diversity Leadership Degree

Feature	Traditional	Novel
Targeted Students	Full-time	Part-time
Delivery Mode	In Person	Online
Delivery Tempo	Synchronous	Asynchronous
Course Length	Semester	Six Weeks
Contract	On-load	Overload
Compensation	Fixed	Variable
Knowledgebase	Disciplinary	Multidisciplinary
Resources	New	Reprioritization
Affordability	Average	Superior
Prospective Employers' Role	Passive Interaction	Active Interaction

Nested Innovations

The journey from ideation to implementation often kindles further creativity and uncovers new opportunities for adding value. These nested innovations can generate a virtuous cycle. When we began reimagining the MADL degree, we realized that time to market was particularly long for graduate degrees. We then defined a new *aspiration:* to reduce time to market for new graduate degrees by half (from three to one-and-a-half years). We then looked at everything that needed to be accomplished to launch a new graduate degree, including internal and external approvals, curriculum design, faculty recruitment, marketing efforts, information system upgrades, etc.

Under the traditional approach, a department was responsible for moving the project along the mostly sequential processes with little central support from the institution. Our *reimagined* process called for the formation of a multidisciplinary team to collaboratively tackle the project while providing support to a faculty champion. We then *transformed* the process by establishing the SPEED (Strategic Program Evaluation, Execution, and Development) Team. The SPEED Team includes individuals with expertise in accreditation, assessment, and curriculum; information sciences; career and alumni services; marketing and communications; data analytics; and instructional technologies. The SPEED Team has already launched our MADL degree with students taking the first class in Fall 2023, just 18 months after ideation. Several additional projects are currently at different levels of consideration by the team.

The implementation of the SPEED Team also brought additional innovations with the creation of the IDEA (Interdisciplinary Degree Envisioning and Articulation) Team. As we worked through the development of our MADL degree with the support of the SPEED Team, we realized that we had a unique opportunity to expand the model used in delivering the MADL degree to other multidisciplinary programs. However, the SPEED Team was conceived to accelerate rather than conceptualize new degrees. Therefore, our new *aspiration* was to create a mechanism allowing scholars to creatively bridge across domains to build stronger and strategically value-added interdisciplinary graduate programs for the SPEED Team to evaluate and accelerate; hence, the creation of the IDEA Team. We *reimagined* the IDEA Team as a group of interdisciplinary faculty members on a process of exploration and experimentation. In fact, when we solicited volunteers for the team, we explicitly called for faculty members who are creative, enjoy unstructured processes, think "outside-the-box," appreciate divergent and convergent thinking, embrace multidisciplinary approaches, and are open to breaking "the rules." We explained that the IDEA Team was going to entertain all kinds of ideas about graduate offerings focusing on early conceptualization of new programs. As such, the team was going to move quickly from one idea to the next, transferring those ideas that receive faculty support to the SPEED Team for further evaluation. The IDEA Team is generating and appraising new proposals, and it is *transforming* how we think about graduate programs by building interdependencies and collaborations.

Guided Innovation
Our culture of innovation must be in communion with our mission and emblematic of our values. As such, the pursuit of excellence must be the engine powering these efforts, fueled by Catholic intellectual tradition and social teaching.

Undeniably, we have a responsibility to pursue excellence in everything we do. It is the least we can do to take full advantage of, and show appreciation for, the gifts that God has entrusted to us. As we pursue excellence, we will lean into Catholic intellectual tradition and social teaching to educate students to be morally responsible leaders who think critically, act wisely, and work skillfully to advance the common good. We have always professed a special care for the poor, the marginalized, and the disenfranchised; celebrated the dignity of every person; embraced empathy, solidarity, and compassion; and safeguarded our planet as our common home. We will leverage our past accomplishments to ensure that our core values continue to flourish and deliver our purpose-driven education.

We also recognize the multifaceted challenges barreling toward higher education. But with our faith as the compass, we will have the courage to navigate these rough waters. As Pope Francis put it, "an authentic faith – which is never comfortable or completely personal – always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it."[4] We will pursue our values, and as we embark on our innovation journey, we will focus on several areas. These initial efforts will be funded by reprioritizing investments and by fostering philanthropic support.

Graduate Programs: We aspire to offer graduate programs that provide our students with the knowledge and tools necessary to tackle some of society's greatest challenges, become agents of change, and work toward a more just, humane, and sustainable world. This includes both the development of novel interdisciplinary programs (taking advantage of the IDEA Team and the SPEED Team), as well as the reconfiguration of our existing offerings. This will situate us as a leading institution in values-based graduate education.

Faculty and Staff Innovation Fellows: We aspire to unleash the imagination and passion of our faculty and staff and to inspire all to dream with enthusiasm. We need visionary faculty and staff ready to address the challenges and opportunities facing higher education over the next decade, functioning as the fulcrum amid the various stakeholders working to position us for long-term success. We envision this as a new, competitive program which supports faculty and staff interested in organizational innovation and in looking holistically at our operations to propel the institution to the forefront of innovation.

Aquinas Scholars: We aspire to offer students craving greater academic challenges the experiences that match their aspirations. Our goal is to boost our

honors program via a continuous re-envisioning process to set the institution apart and develop such a compelling offering that we become the school of choice for academically gifted students. We will engage our stakeholders in a stimulating ideation process creating opportunities to revisualize our value proposition while affirming excellence and raising expectations. One component that we are considering as part of the Aquinas Scholars program is further fostering undergraduate research.

Enrollment Management: We aspire to elevate our recruitment, admissions, financial aid, and student retention operations, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels in order to increase access and affordability while providing for the long-term financial sustainability and stewardship of our institution. We will invest in building a first-in-class operation founded on a highly relational approach, data analytics, and novel methods. We will collaboratively reorganize administrative structures and implement data-driven decision-making to improve agility when taking advantage of opportunities.

Research: We aspire to magnify our externally funded research to enhance the student experience, attract and retain the best faculty, build our infrastructure, and cultivate our visibility and reputation. We will relish every opportunity to pursue research for the common good and to break down silos by innovating through interdisciplinary collaborations, fostering a sense of communal ownership of our research endeavors.

The Digital Student Experience: We aspire to significantly enhance student engagement and support by integrating state-of-the-art digital technologies into the student's journey, from first inquiry to graduation and beyond. This new digital student experience will improve and augment communications by serving as a personal navigator supporting all aspects of students' interactions while building deeper relationships with faculty and staff.

An Invitation
Let's imagine welcoming our students to a University of St. Thomas that, while being faithful to its mission, continuously re-invents itself by embracing experimentation and rewarding grit. Together, we can harness the potential of innovation to give life to such imagined futures; to find our own integrated, courageous, and hopeful contributions to help solve society's biggest challenges; and to make St. Thomas the school of choice for visionaries, dreamers, and changemakers.

These efforts will recognize not only the vital work our faculty and staff perform for the empowerment and success of our students and community, but also how everyone's differences inherently embed new strengths. Such holistic integration across difference is one of the beauties of Catholic education, ensuring our faculty, staff, and students all feel respected, supported, and integrated throughout the unique work they undertake.

Our journey of innovation will not be easy; it will require dedication and commitment. Nevertheless, we accept the challenges of our time and are ready to navigate uncharted waters, inspired by Catholic intellectual tradition and social teaching. Innovation as model and inspiration will define the St. Thomas experience in the years and decades to come; and it could not be better news. After all, what can be more exciting than the ability to create our own future? So, I invite you to come along and join us in answering the call of innovation.

More details will be forthcoming, as will numerous information sessions and opportunities to answer this call.

Endnotes
1. John Ireland, "The Mission of Catholics in America," in *The Church and Modern Society: Lectures and Addresses* (Chicago: D. H. McBride & Co., 1897), 66.

2. Nathan D. Graw, *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2018), 19.

3. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 2, a.5.

4. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium, Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father Francis to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2013), 145.