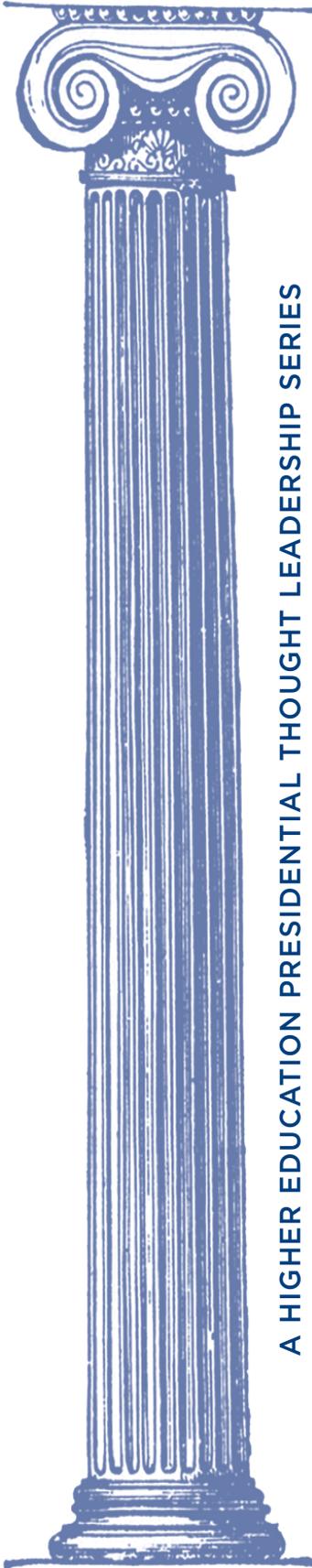
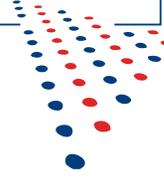


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CHAPTER

6

Critical Doing

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Critical Doing

Dr. Angel Cabrera: George Mason University President

The world's most pressing problems call for new approaches that are multidisciplinary, multi-stakeholder, and multicultural. Whether climate change, hunger, infectious disease, or transnational crime, we face issues that are too complex to understand, let alone act on, through a narrow lens.

These “wicked problems” can only be analyzed by juxtaposing multiple disciplinary perspectives. They can only be understood by examining their impact on different constituencies. And they can only be solved by integrating diverse—even antagonistic—points of view.

Rather than equipping students with the tools to do that, universities are increasingly asked to produce employable, highly specialized professionals who can meet the needs of today's marketplace. Graduates must be able to seamlessly join the ranks of organizations. Many of the organizations, however, have proved incapable of addressing today's problems if they are not contributing to or perpetuating them.

As Albert Einstein said, “The thinking it took to get us into this mess is not the same thinking that is going to get us out of it.” But we continue to play where the proverbial puck is, not where it should be headed.

Critical thinking has long been held as a hallmark of American liberal education. Our challenge today is to develop not only critical thinkers, but critical doers: individuals with the skills, attitudes, methods, and mindset necessary to creatively and collaboratively engage in finding new solutions to complex problems, to transform institutions or to create new ones. Call them problem solvers, leaders, or entrepreneurs.

Climate change is a perfect example. At my institution, George Mason University, we have impressive experts tackling the issue from a variety of disciplinary angles. Jagadish Shukla, a geophysicist, was one of the lead authors of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that shared the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize with Al Gore. Thomas Lovejoy, a biologist, has helped document how global warming is impacting *biodiversity* around the world—a term he himself coined in 1980. Edward Maibach, a leading communications scholar, has produced in collaboration with researchers at Yale the best evidence available of how American attitudes have evolved around this issue. Andrew Light, now on leave with the U.S. State Department, has dissected the moral and political tensions inherent in any attempt to solving climate change. And Gregory Unruh has worked with organizations around the world to develop environmentally sustainable business practices.

“We not only need to be prepared to solve our current problems. We need to be prepared to solve problems that do not yet exist. Only critical doers will lead the way.”



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The key components are here, as they are in many of our great research universities, to provide students with the type of multidisciplinary, action-oriented, collaborative learning experience that will help them grow into the critical problem solvers that we need. Yet, left to our own devices, we gravitate to our disciplinary homes to develop specialized programs in the comfort and safety of our departments.

Many of our students are passionate about climate change and are committed to making a difference. But traditional academic structures make it difficult for students to integrate the resources available within a university, develop a multidisciplinary understanding of the problem they care so much about, and experiment first-hand with possible interventions.

The keys to unlocking the climate change puzzle are buried in geophysics and biology; industrial, civil, and agricultural engineering; energy and transportation policy; demographics; and international relations. None of the disciplines can reverse climate change independently. Only leaders who can think creatively across disciplines and collaborate with others from various backgrounds will have a shot on goal.

And here is a sobering thought: we not only need to be prepared to solve our current problems. We need to be prepared to solve problems that do not yet exist. Only critical doers will lead the way.

Universities are facing mounting pressure to demonstrate our value to students and to society. George Mason's strategic plan highlights "return on investment" as a key element of our promise to our students. But *value* is often and simplistically translated into employability. Employability is just one dimension of our value equation. And while, for the record, we are quite good at it, our goal must be broader: to enable our graduates to pursue meaningful, impactful lives, as well as successful careers, all while helping shape our world for the better.

By developing both critical thinkers *and* critical doers, we would be putting students in the best position to help solve the most complex problems facing society. By doing so, they will find purpose and meaning and make themselves even more valuable to employers.

Students who can think creatively and critically, who can work in and lead diverse teams and who can integrate multiple disciplinary angles in their analyses, will be better suited to achieving results in today's complex enterprises. Employers need these skills to stay competitive. Therefore, developing such graduates serves everyone's interests.

As a large public research university, Mason is committed to finding scalable methods to deliver that kind of education. And we are aware that doing so is a wicked problem in itself. Small pilots may offer valuable direction, but our challenge is to develop experiences that can touch thousands of students, not just dozens.

Having experienced significant growth in the past 40 years, Mason has evolved from a small local college into the largest research university in Virginia, with 34,000 students. Our student body is extraordinarily diverse. They come from 130 countries, and more than one-third of our students self-identify as first-generation college students.

We sit right outside the nation's capital at the intersection of a host of federal agencies, 175 embassies, 551 think tanks, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Inter-American Development Bank, myriad nongovernmental organizations, and a thriving business community with leaders in information technology, defense, hospitality, and other industries.

This rich diversity of cultures, industries, sectors, and institutions, and the inherent global connectivity of our community, place us in an advantageous position to try and make meaningful contributions toward solving some of our most pressing challenges, both through our teaching and our research. Our challenge is determining how to create the structures and culture that can leverage these resources and offer a new type of learning experience.



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We started by asking the fundamental questions: Why do we exist? Why do we do what we do? Our vision and strategic plan, which resulted from a broad and inclusive effort over 18 months, provide our collective answer to that question and provide the foundation for the new type of undergraduate experience we are pursuing. The university's vision is to be the best university *for* the world.

Our definition of an ideal "Mason Graduate" is an engaged citizen and well-rounded scholar (critical thinker) who's prepared to act (critical doer). One of our top strategic commitments in our vision document is innovative learning. Another, research of consequence, extends our commitment to global problem solving to our scholarship as well. Our measure of success is not how well we do in traditional rankings but what impact we make in the lives of our students, our community, and the world. From this starting point, we took inventory of the key resources that could lead the way. Among them were our New Century College and our Center for Social Entrepreneurship.

Since the mid-1990s, with considerable success, Mason has facilitated cross-disciplinary, cross-sector collaboration through New Century College, until now a unit of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences that follows a challenge-driven philosophy and enables students to create a personalized curriculum. From exploring novel approaches to disease prevention, to empowering at-risk youth, to launching sustainability initiatives on and off-campus, students tie their undergraduate experience to projects in complex societal issues they are passionate about.

New Century College has served as a sort of institutional laboratory helping to incubate successful multidisciplinary initiatives such as the Smithsonian-Mason School of Conservation or the Center for the Advancement of Well-Being. And New Century College was the reason why, in 2008, Mason became one of four Ashoka Changemaker Campus pioneers.

The Mason Center for Social Entrepreneurship was created more recently, with the specific purpose of preparing graduates to build organizations to tackle social and environmental problems. Students at the center learn to analyze complex problems and develop the organizational and business skills necessary to create and grow sustainable enterprises.

We are now embarking on forming a School of Impact and Innovation that combines the resources of both New Century College and the Center for Social Entrepreneurship. This new school will integrate faculty leaders across all colleges and schools and offer a challenge-based, integrative curriculum to students throughout the university.

Our goal is to create a platform in which faculty innovators, regardless of their home discipline, can work with students in an environment where research, discovery, and open-ended problem solving in real-world contexts are at the center of the learning journey.

One hallmark element of our approach is to provide opportunities for experiential and integrative learning through research, field studies, internships, apprenticeships, study abroad programs, community-based programs, service learning, senior capstones, online courses with international students, and other methods currently under design. These experiences will teach our students how to adapt to different contexts and activate knowledge from one context to another.

We rely on the accumulated experience of New Century College scholars and staff, the new ideas of faculty across the university, our strong and diverse student body, and our relationships with community partners, government agencies, and industry leaders.

Another great example of how this approach can work in practice is our School of Conflict Analysis and Resolution (S-CAR). Created in the 1980s as a multidisciplinary center, it eventually offered the first graduate and undergraduate degree programs in the field. The idea behind S-CAR was to bring sociologists,



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anthropologists, political scientists, theologians, philosophers, psychologists, and others under one roof with the explicit purpose of “ending cycles of violence” around the world through scholarship and practice.

At the heart of our S-CAR’s philosophy is the notion of “reflective practice,” an approach that blends theory and practice—critical thinking and doing. One of S-CAR’s programs, the Applied Practice and Theory Program, is a year-long experience during which cohorts of students work in and with the community in the resolution of a conflict. S-CAR tries to remove barriers between theory and practice in scholarship as well as in the education of practitioners and scholars.

Mason is not alone in this journey. Virtually every university in the country is asking similar questions and running its own experiments. We have looked at dozens of initiatives across American higher education. Many hold great promise. Our collective challenge is determining how to scale up these initiatives, how to mainstream them, how to make them the norm rather than the exception.

The future of American liberal education, and the world we live in, depend on our making that happen.



Dr. Angel Cabrera was named the sixth president of George Mason University in July 2012. Mason, a modern, innovative university selected as one of the top 200 research universities in the world by the Academic Ranking of World Universities, also has quickly become the largest public university in Virginia. Prior to George Mason University, Cabrera led two internationally renowned business schools: Thunderbird School of Global Management in Arizona and IE Business School in Madrid, Spain. As a business educator, he played a key role in advancing professional ethics and corporate social responsibility.

As a senior advisor, United Nations Global Compact, Cabrera led the creation of “The Principles for Responsible Management Education,” adopted by more than 500 business schools around the world. In partnership with the World Economic Forum and leading Harvard Business School faculty, he co-founded The Oath Project, an international initiative to establish a code of conduct for business leaders.

In 2004, *BusinessWeek* named Cabrera one of 25 “Stars of Europe,” and in 2011 the *Financial Times* recognized him as one of the top 20 business school leaders in the world. Recognized by top international organizations, The World Economic Forum named Cabrera a “Global Leader for Tomorrow” in 2002, a “Young Global Leader” in 2005, and, in 2008, the chairman of the Global Agenda Council for promoting entrepreneurship. In 2008, the Aspen Institute named him a Henry Crown Fellow and in 2010, he served as topic leader for the annual meeting of the Clinton Global Initiative.

Cabrera has written numerous papers in leading academic journals. His most recent book, *Being Global: How to Think, Act and Lead in a Transformed World*, was published by *Harvard Business Review* in 2012. His views on global leadership, higher education, and corporate citizenship have been quoted by leading global media, including *The Economist*, *Time*, CNN, CNBC, BBC, *El País*, *Forbes*, the *International Herald Tribune*, and *The New York Times*.

On the board of specialty retailer PetSmart and biotech company Inovio Pharmaceuticals, Cabrera also serves the Council for the International Exchange of Scholars (Fulbright Scholars Program), the Bankinter Foundation for Innovation in Madrid, the Northern Virginia Technology Council, and other academic and civic boards. Cabrera is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, and past chairman of the Georgia Tech Advisory Board.

Cabrera holds B.S. and M.S. degrees in engineering from the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, Spain’s premier engineering university. He earned M.S. and Ph.D degrees in psychology and cognitive science from the Georgia Institute of Technology, which he attended as a Fulbright Scholar.

