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Future Now: DePaul's Innovative Strategies Draw National Attention

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“Like a sculptor who sees the splendor that will emerge from a slab of marble, we hold in our minds a powerful image of the DePaul we aspire to become.”

—THE REV. DENNIS H. HOLTSCHNEIDER, C.M., LAUNCHING VISION 2018, DEPAUL’S CURRENT STRATEGIC PLAN
Alexa Zajecka is about to graduate from DePaul with a degree that didn’t exist six years ago, bestowed by a college that didn’t exist then either. The senior from Wilmette, Ill., is wrapping up her bachelor’s degree in health sciences from DePaul’s College of Science and Health (CSH), both created in 2011. She’s one of about 750 students currently majoring in health sciences; another 400 already have graduated.

Zajecka is not unique. More than 10,000 DePaul students have enrolled in programs created within the last five years. Health sciences—now the second-favorite major for freshmen entering DePaul—is just one of 178 new majors, concentrations and certificates established since Fr. Holtschneider became president in 2004.

“Father Dennis cultivated an environment in which faculty dared to try out new ideas in order to stay on the cutting edge and make our curriculum highly competitive. Close to 200 new programs were developed, passed by Faculty Council and approved by the provost during my time as Faculty Council president from 2011 to 2016,” says Michaela Winchatz, associate professor in the College of Communication.

That spirit of innovation permeated the university throughout Fr. Holtschneider’s presidency. DePaul pioneered everything from student support services to community partnerships, garnering attention and praise throughout the higher education sector. Fr. Holtschneider personally represented DePaul on the national stage while advancing higher education by serving as a member of the board of directors of the American Council on Education, a trustee of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, and chair of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities.

In 2016, DePaul was ranked among the 25 most innovative universities in the nation by U.S. News & World Report.

DePaul innovates purposefully, guided by three successive strategic plans, the latest of which—Vision 2018—has five core goals:

1. Enhance academic quality and support educational innovation
2. Deepen the university’s distinctive connection to the global city of Chicago (see “Partnerships,” page 19)
3. Strengthen DePaul’s Catholic and Vincentian identity
4. Foster diversity and inclusion
5. Ensure a business model that builds the university’s continued strength and educational excellence

Here are some of the key initiatives that are driving Vision 2018 to a successful conclusion.

Academic quality and innovation

ANTICIPATING TRENDS. When it comes to developing new programs, “Ideas come first,” says David Miller, dean of the College of Computing and Digital Media (CDM). Take DePaul’s thriving master’s degree in predictive analytics, better known as big data, jointly offered by CDM and the Kellstadt Graduate School of Business.

“We were the first in the area to offer a sizable graduate program in big data,” he says. “That’s an example of our faculty looking forward, seeing that this was going to become a hot field and taking advantage of our ability to move quickly.”

Once an idea takes hold, everything snowballs. A single popular degree in digital cinema grew into CDM’s School of Cinematic Arts. Faculty brought on board to teach courses in video game and graphic design spurred the creation of CDM’s School of Design.

“Ultrafast” is how Gerry Koocher, dean of CSH, describes it. He marvels at how DePaul’s Board of Trustees, when presented with a sound business case, responded with resources in the middle of a fiscal year to hire nursing faculty and double the capacity of the master’s entry to nursing program.

CSH didn’t stop there. It built new labs to meet growing student demand in less than a year and aligned undergraduate and graduate curricula to create the Pathways Honors Program in less than two years. In partnership with Kellstadt, it is now creating a combined bachelor’s, master’s and certification program in actuarial science.

The College of Communication was created just four years before CSH, in 2007, says Dean Salma Ghanem. Both enrollment and the number of faculty members have roughly doubled since then. “It was really foresight to see that the world is relying more and more on communication skills, and the demand for communication keeps increasing. We paralleled and met the demand,” she says.

In 2006, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (now the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences [LAS]) launched a minor in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer studies, making DePaul the first Catholic university to offer one. LAS began offering a master’s degree in refugee and forced migration studies in 2015, the first of its kind in the United States.
NEW FACILITIES ACROSS CAMPUS. “Every college must have a proper home,” Fr. Holtschneider often said. Once the new School of Music building is completed and opens in 2018, each college and school at DePaul—plus the John T. Richardson Library—will be in new or extensively renovated facilities. Renowned architects Pelli Clarke Pelli and Joseph Antunovich designed several of these buildings, including the Wintrust Arena at McCormick Square that will return DePaul basketball to Chicago.

Lucas Baisch (THE ’14) understands the power of place. During his first three years at DePaul, the playwright studied in The Theatre School’s former home, a renovated elementary school on Kenmore Avenue. “It was not a pretty sight,” he says, but “it evoked a sense of camaraderie in the student body.”

Baisch says he felt very lucky to spend his senior year in the new building, where his play “The Scavengers” was first produced. Initially a bit intimidated, he and his classmates quickly adapted to their new surroundings. “I do think people work differently in this kind of building,” says Baisch, who is currently under commission as a member of the Goodman Theatre’s 2016-17 Playwrights Unit. “Having such high-end spaces made the students work to their highest caliber because they knew a lot was expected of them. It really raised the bar for what making theatre at DePaul could look like.”

“Father Holtschneider has made the arts a critical component of the DePaul experience,” says John Culbert, dean of The Theatre School. “Our world-class arts programs are now supported by elegant new facilities. The new buildings for theatre, music and the art museum, plus our partnership with Cinespace, enable us to explore truth through the lens of the arts, encouraging critical thinking and conversation, and thus serving the future of our society.”

“Having such high-end spaces made the students work to their highest caliber because they knew a lot was expected of them.”
—Lucas Baisch (THE ’14)

THE ONLINE ADVANTAGE. Beth Kelly was skeptical about the value of online courses—until she started teaching one. Now Kelly, a professor of women’s and gender studies who has taught the sophomore multiculturalism seminar since 1996, is a convert.

“It’s understandable that diverse groups of students who have little in common are reluctant to talk honestly about issues like race, sex and gender. Over the years, as DePaul expanded into ever more separate programs, it became increasingly difficult to create a ‘community of comfort’ in the classroom,” she says.

But after she started teaching the course online a few years ago, she realized something unexpected was happening. “The discussion boards were lighting up, absolutely vibrantly, as students enthusiastically made linkages between historical and contemporary issues.

Students are both challenged and inspired by new facilities such as the stages in the Pelli Clarke Pelli–designed Theatre School building.
and experiences,” she says. “While they may be uncomfortable talking to strangers in the classroom, they have no inhibitions about participating in online discussions.”

Online courses are the modern expression of the flexibility DePaul has always offered its students, according to GianMario Besana, associate provost for global engagement and online learning. While DePaul’s online courses are available in all 50 states, most students mix online and on-campus courses in Chicago. Thirteen percent of DePaul’s credit hours now are being delivered online, and 23 degree programs are entirely online.

“We know that our students live complicated lives. Our graduate students typically are people who work full time and come to school at night,” Besana says. “Having the possibility of taking one or more courses online in a given quarter really makes the difference for some students between reaching graduation or not.”

Kelly can confirm that. “I’ve had a number of young women enroll in my course when they were in later stages of pregnancy, when it would be difficult to come to campus. One actually submitted a paper just as she was going into labor!” she says. “I often have students with disabilities in the course, especially in winter quarter when someone with mobility issues would be challenged by icy, cold weather.”

DePaul’s successful embrace of online learning is due in large part to the DePaul Online Teaching Series (DOTS), created in 2008 to share best practices with faculty. More than 540 faculty members have completed the program, which won the national excellence award from the Sloan Consortium in 2012.

**Foster diversity and inclusion**

**A GLOBAL CAMPUS.** “The impact of this trip was huge!” enthuses Bailley Leppert, who visited Assisi, Italy, as part of DePaul’s innovative FY abroad program, created in 2009 specifically for freshmen. “I felt like my eyes were finally open to the world.” Leppert, a sophomore majoring in public relations and advertising, says she looks at every class differently now. “This experience made me consider the international aspect of everything that I’m learning,” she says.

That’s exactly the outcome Fr. Holtschneider hoped for when he asked faculty and staff to ensure that students become global citizens. “The university wants to expose our students to the largest possible number of intercultural experiences,” he explains. “We know, because there are data, that this can be truly transformational.”

During the past dozen years, the study abroad program was centralized and streamlined, making it easier for faculty members to create trips. Short-term trips that are more affordable for students multiplied, and the FY@broad program offered scholarship support to help more students participate.

Eliza Talaga, a sophomore majoring in international studies, was one of those scholarship recipients. “Going abroad forces you to learn new skills and immerse yourself into an entirely different culture. It teaches you so much,” she says. “Scholarships really help you get the most out of your experiences while you are in college.”

DePaul also brings the world to Chicago. The number of international students on campus has increased. Faculty members who have taught in other nations, often as part of DePaul degree programs held in countries such as Bahrain and Kenya, bring their experiences back to the classroom.

“When our faculty members teach and consult internationally, it helps enrich the classroom experience here at DePaul,” says Patrick J. Murphy, professor of management and entrepreneurship, who has taught abroad extensively. “Teaching in other countries builds an educator’s skills, and it enables one to engage students from a broader range of backgrounds more effectively.”

He continues, “Having international students here helps our university connect the DePaul educational experience with the rest of the world and better enables all of our students to achieve their goals.” Students learn firsthand how residents of other countries view concepts such as leadership. They build networks that can help them make vital connections.

Murphy muses, “It’s almost ironic, but you can learn much about your own country by getting out of it for a while. Your understanding of living and working in America is made richer by experiencing other cultures around the world.”

**STUDENTS FIRST.** “When I first got to DePaul, it was so confusing,” says Mercedes Diaz (LAS ’16), who was the first in her family to go to college. “I was at DePaul Central every day asking questions.”

Diaz quickly learned that DePaul Central—the one-stop shop for registration and financial issues—was created to help students like her. “We created infrastructure to support students in all the business and advising processes, in everything we could do to make all the steps easier,” says Caryn Chaden, associate provost. Students can declare or change their major and check their degree requirements online 24/7. Incoming transfer students can see exactly what credit they’ll get for courses they’ve already taken.

“These programs are here to help us in our journey through college,” says Diaz. “This is the university doing it right.”

DePaul’s high-touch innovations include launching the Learning Commons, a central location where students get help with math, writing and foreign languages as well as participate in study “jams.” Mentorship programs, such as the Men of Color Initiative and Digital Divas, sprouted within colleges and across special-interest groups.
The university earned national recognition for its success implementing initiatives such as the McNair Scholars, a federally funded program that helps low-income and minority students prepare for doctoral study and academic careers. “I had no idea that to even get into a PhD graduate program you needed research experience. The McNair Scholars Program made me aware of research opportunities,” says Jeremy Pagan (CSH ‘16). With DePaul’s help, he spent 10 weeks as an undergraduate research assistant to a Harvard University professor.

“I can definitely say that without the help of McNair, I wouldn’t be as prepared for graduate school as I am now,” says Pagan. He’s currently a doctoral student in social psychology at Tufts University, where he’s conducting research on perceptions of police, negative impacts of stereotyping, and intergroup and interracial interactions.

Once again, U.S. News & World Report took notice. In 2016, the magazine recognized DePaul for not only enrolling but also graduating students from underrepresented populations at rates substantially above the national average.

“We care about where you’re going more than about where you’ve been,” says Jon Boeckenstedt, associate vice president associate vice president for enrollment management and marketing.

“These programs are here to help us in our journey through college. This is the university doing it right.”

—MERCEDES DIAZ (LAS ’16)

A sound business model

MANY DREAMS, ONE MISSION. Fr. Holtschneider was recruited in part to build the development and alumni engagement efforts. The result was a fundraising campaign five times larger than DePaul had ever undertaken. The three-pronged, $250 million campaign focused on student scholarships, new buildings and endowed support for recruiting top-notch faculty. The Many Dreams, One Mission Campaign far outpaced that mark, raising more than $333 million, including $107 million for student scholarships.

“Father Dennis flew the length and breadth of this country to connect with alumni, some of whom had never donated to DePaul or who were lapsed donors,” says Mary Dempsey (JD ’82), former Chicago Public Library commissioner and a DePaul trustee who was board chair during the campaign. Even though the recession hit just before the campaign started, “He was determined to make the Many Dreams campaign a success, and it certainly was,” she says.

The School of Hospitality Leadership in the Driehaus College of Business, hailed by industry leaders in Chicago’s vibrant hospitality market after it opened in 2010, was one of the first new programs to benefit from the campaign. “The Many Dreams campaign was ideal timing,” says Misty Johanson, professor and director of the school and, beginning July 1, interim dean of the Driehaus College of Business. The campaign generated matching funds to complement a $7.5 million gift from the Hilton Foundation, enabling the school to open. Enrollment and employer praise surged. In 2015, every graduate found a job in the industry, she says.
“Just recently, we were named the most recognized hospitality program in Illinois and a top 100 program in the country,” says Johanson. “This type of enrollment, investment and ranking is similar to that of programs in existence for decades.”

Donors changed the footprint of the Lincoln Park Campus by making possible the construction of two science buildings, the Arts & Letters building, the DePaul Art Museum, and new homes for The Theatre School and the School of Music. The endowment nearly doubled to $422 million.

Of all these accomplishments, Fr. Holtschneider is perhaps most proud of the significant increase in scholarships benefiting people like Avery Cunningham (LAS ’15, MA ’16) and Andrea Ortiz (LAS ’16). “Growing up as a first-generation student, I was on the fence between working and school,” says Ortiz. “My parents could not provide the money to pay for school. At times, I worked two jobs to pay my way through school.”

Thanks to the Faculty/Staff Endowed Scholarship she received during her senior year, “I was able to concentrate more on school and less on how much money I had left to pay for my tuition,” says Ortiz, who is now working as a youth organizer for the Brighton Park Neighborhood Council. “It was rewarding to see my hard work pay off.”

Cunningham, who received both merit and need-based scholarships, says, “People who contribute to scholarships can never really know how much their gift impacts a young person’s college experience. There are a lot of young people who have a lot of incredible academic and merit standing but can’t attend the college that they’d like to because of their socioeconomic standing.”

Avery Cunningham (LAS ’15, MA ’16) is one of the many recent alumni who benefited from more than $107 million in new scholarships raised during the Many Dreams, One Mission fundraising campaign.

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**Freshman Four- and Six-Year Graduation Rates**

DePaul’s four-year graduation rate has risen 10 percent in the most recent years for which complete data are available.
Now she uses the skills she learned at DePaul in her home state of Tennessee as the program manager for Memphis Challenge, which prepares high-achieving students of color to become future Memphis leaders. “In the English program, I was taught how to think critically, think broadly, think from different perspectives and then express my perspective in multiple ways to multiple people,” says Cunningham. “Scholarships help give some of the best and brightest of the upcoming generation the ability to attend school and get a liberal arts education.”

BLUE DEMONS RISING. Fr. Holtschneider recognized that DePaul Athletics is about more than sports. It’s a way to raise the university’s profile nationally, capturing the interest of prospective students and making a DePaul degree recognizable to employers far from the Midwest.

“Chief among Father Dennis’ many legacy contributions to DePaul is his critical role in working with the mayor and the City of Chicago to bring men’s basketball back to Chicago.”

—ATHLETICS DIRECTOR JEAN LENTI PONSETTO (EDU ’78)

“Father Dennis’ understanding of the BIG EAST Conference was immensely important as DePaul transitioned into the league in his first year as president,” says Athletics Director Jean Lenti Ponsetto (EDU ’78). As a member of the board of directors for the conference, Fr. Holtschneider helped negotiate the BIG EAST’s separation from universities with football teams, craft a contract that brought the Blue Demons unprecedented television coverage and retain Madison Square Garden as the home of the BIG EAST men’s basketball tournament.

He was committed to ensuring Blue Demons succeed academically, Lenti Ponsetto says. Under his direction, Athletics strengthened academic advising and support and increased access to Career Center services. Student-athletes responded by steadily improving their academic performance; they reached an all-time high in the fall of 2016 with a cumulative grade-point average (GPA) of 3.5 across all 15 teams.

“DePaul teams have outpaced their BIG EAST competition in the classroom during much of his presidency,” she says. “DePaul has the highest number of team GPA awards in the league year after year.”

His support for athletic performance was equally strong, Lenti Ponsetto says. Over the past decade, DePaul renovated Wish Field and built Cacciatore Stadium (men’s and women’s soccer and women’s softball), refurbished the Cherry Family Track at the Ray Meyer Fitness and Recreation Center (men’s and women’s indoor track) and upgraded the indoor golf practice facility. He forged relationships to increase the number of off-campus facilities available for practice and meets. Coaches and staff were included in DePaul’s comprehensive compensation review, ensuring that Athletics can hire and retain high-achieving employees.

“Chief among Father Dennis’ many legacy contributions to DePaul is his critical role in working with the mayor and the City of Chicago to bring men’s basketball back to Chicago,” she says. “The Wintrust Arena at McCormick Square is scheduled to open in the fall of 2017 on time and on budget.”

A strong Catholic and Vincentian identity

Catholic and Vincentian values have been emphasized and strengthened across the university through initiatives spearheaded by Fr. Holtschneider and the Rev. Edward R. Udovic, C.M. (LAS ’76), senior executive for university mission, secretary of the university and vice president for teaching and learning resources. William Hay (MBA ’66, DHL ’06), a longtime DePaul trustee, lead donor and one of the co-chairs of the Many Dreams, One Mission fundraising campaign, strongly supports them.

“As a student, I didn’t know much about St. Vincent de Paul, the man whose name is above our door,” Hay says. “Once I learned about his life’s work, I wanted to make sure that every student who graduates from DePaul knows about his values and what he stood for.”

It starts during freshman orientation, when every new student is asked, “What are you doing for justice?” says Spencer Olson, a senior
majoring in theatre arts who is planning a career in drama therapy. “This phrase has always stuck with me and is what inspired me to become an active member of the community at DePaul,” he says.

Olson sought out additional programs such as Meet Me at the Mission, which allows undergraduates to explore what it means to be a Vincentian leader. “DePaul proved to me that we can all be agents of social change, and [the university] has presented me with opportunities to do so,” he says.

Yara Ismail, a senior majoring in public relations and advertising, participated in the annual Vincentian Heritage Tour, a guided educational tour for students, faculty and staff. Participants visit sites in Paris and throughout France as they deepen their knowledge of the university’s patron. (Read more on depaulmagazine.com.)

“Walking in the footsteps of St. Vincent and seeing the Syrian refugees in the streets of Paris really helped me understand that the Vincentian mission is timeless,” says Ismail. “We should always be asking the Vincentian question—‘What must be done?’—and looking for ways to answer it.”

Scholarship is equally important to DePaul’s identity, says Udovic: “The only way for DePaul to strengthen its Vincentian and Catholic identity is to explore, study, debate and then embody that identity inside and outside of the classroom.”

Fr. Holtschneider says that DePaul became the world’s preeminent center for Vincentian studies in 2007 when the Vincentian Mission Institute was founded and the Vincentian Studies Institute relocated to the university. Catholic scholarship also increased after faculty members created a separate degree program in Catholic studies.

DePaul also strengthened opportunities for spiritual practice. The St. Louise de Marillac Chapel opened on the Lincoln Park Campus in 2007. University Ministry increased outreach to students from all faith backgrounds, and DePaul created a campus Hillel Center for Jewish students and hired the university’s first Islamic chaplain.

Through Fr. Holtschneider, DePaul became more tightly entwined with Catholic institutions throughout the metropolitan area. During his presidency, DePaul affiliated with the Catholic Theological Union, enhanced its relationship with Catholic schools and forged connections with Ascension, the world’s largest Catholic health system. Starting July 1, Fr. Holtschneider will serve as Ascension’s executive vice president and chief operating officer.

“He has established DePaul as the urban university that embodies Vincentian values for the benefit of people in our city, across the country and around the world,” says Dempsey.

“The only way for DePaul to strengthen its Vincentian and Catholic identity is to explore, study, debate and then embody that identity inside and outside of the classroom.”

—THE REV. EDWARD R. UDovic, C.M. (LAS ’76)