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The education of a freshman president

St. Norbert College

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President Thomas Kunkel

The education of a freshman president

By Thomas Kunkel

This article first appeared in the March/April 2010 issue of Trusteeship magazine and is reproduced by kind permission.

One of the many perks of being president of St. Norbert College is living in a lovely presidential house. Like the campus itself, the house is situated along northeastern Wisconsin's picturesque Fox River. It is large but not ostentatious.

As intended, it can accommodate a lot of

people.

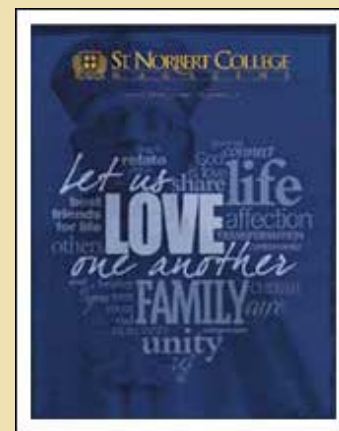
Still, I think we were all surprised when on a Sunday afternoon last winter we managed to squeeze in 130 visitors. The occasion was a reception for local high school seniors who had been accepted for admission to St. Norbert – and their moms, dads, siblings, and just maybe one or two distant cousins.

I was talking with a parent in the jammed kitchen when across the way I noticed a father and son emerging from belowdecks. The dad saw me, made his way through the scrum and said, "My son says he'll come to St. Norbert – if he can live in your basement."

I thought for a moment. At a private college, making your enrollment is crucial in the best of times, and given that winter's reeling economy it was more important than ever.

"We can talk," I said.

The president as chief enrollment officer? Well, sure – and it turned out that was only the beginning. As I learned in my "freshman year" as a college president, you wear many hats. I also learned that which hats you wear, and when you wear them, is often entirely out of your control.



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[Too 'Old School' for our own good?](#)

President Tom Kunkel challenges colleges and universities to embrace new ways of delivering higher education.



[A new face in the cafe](#)

Steve Pyne (Dining Services), who has Down syndrome, was profiled in this recent article in the student newspaper, the St. Norbert Times.



[La Perichole](#)

St. Norbert College Magazine dropped in on a rehearsal for this three-act operetta production, to be staged on campus.



[More than a photo](#)

A gallery of images from a trip that connected a child in Kenya with his sponsors in the United

It was in the summer of 2008 that I came to St. Norbert, a nationally ranked and respected liberal arts college that was founded in 1898 by the Norbertine order of Catholic priests. They Norbertines are an ancient order, established early in the 12th-century by St. Norbert of Xanten, a charismatic Church reformer who crisscrossed much of Europe and left dozens of abbeys in his wake. That makes the Norbertines a more venerable order than, say, the Jesuits, Franciscans or Dominicans, albeit less well known in the United States than their religious confreres because they don't have a large presence here.

Ours is the only Norbertine institution of higher learning in the world, and the order's three core values – *communio*, or a deeply felt sense of community; service to others; and reflection – are likewise the core values of St. Norbert College. That fact, as well as St. Norbert's strong commitment to its Catholic and liberal arts missions, made the job extremely appealing when I was brought into the search for the school's seventh president.

Not that I was a conventional-looking presidential candidate. In many ways I am more like the accidental educator. True, I'd just come from eight years as dean of the journalism program at the University of Maryland, but previous to that I'd worked almost entirely in print media – as a reporter, newspaper editor, magazine writer and book author. I was not a Ph.D., and though I was widely published and had demonstrated proficiency in various research disciplines, I'd not toiled in the academic vineyard.

So while I had a pretty good intellectual idea of what a college president does, there's no substitute for actually sitting in the chair.

Thus, a new president quickly finds: When someone notices you casually drinking a Diet Dr. Pepper, the next day a case of them turns up in your refrigerator. People laugh at even your lamest jokes. And no one wants to see your bare legs, except maybe at the golf course (and even then not after Labor Day).

Of course, there was plenty I did know coming in. I was expected to be the chief fundraiser. I would be an important recruiter. And I was more than ready to be the head cheerleader.

I knew, too, that at the end of the day all those pieces of the job are in the service of a president's most vital role: to articulate the institution's vision, and then set about realizing it. The articulation began with my inaugural speech that first autumn. Stripping away the rhetoric, my key goals were straightforward: I wanted to take an already outstanding college to an even higher level. As we prepared to open a state-of-the-art new library and residence hall, I wanted to keep that strong momentum rolling. And I wanted to widen the academy's awareness of a fine college that, much like its patron order, was less well known than it deserved to be. We were embarking, I said, on a collective, campus-wide "pursuit of excellence."

All well and good. But on the road to excellence what you don't count on are the surprises - and those began in fairly short order.

Not three months into my tenure, the global economy went into a swoon. Like college presidents everywhere, I queasily watched our endowment do a bungee number. With my extremely able team of vice presidents, we worked hard to assuage employee and student anxiety, and St. Norbert almost certainly came through this tempering fire stronger than ever. But one aspect of the ordeal in particular was not a

States.



[A father's love](#)

Jeff Kratz '92 offers a unique perspective on a father's love.



[Words from life](#)

The poetry of **Ken Zahorski** (English, Emeritus) deals with fathers and sons, phases of life and familiar figures remembered across the years.



[World view](#)

Gratzia Villarroel (Political Science) speaks with **Dean Michael Marsden** on international issues and educational opportunities.



[Man of property](#)

Joe Jones '12 sits down with **Mike Dauplaise '84** to discuss an education in entrepreneurship and the launch of Jones' third business. He is 21 years old.



[Dick Bennett on Gary Grzesk](#)

The basketball legend remembers his years presiding over the storied defensive career of Grzesk, current coach to the Green Knight men.



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little surreal: Me, an expert in high finance? I mean, I suddenly found myself in emergency meetings talking about "swap rates" and LIBOR as if I actually knew what they were. To a guy who got a D in the only business course he took as an undergrad himself, that was scary stuff.

Or me, an expert in public health? About this same time the specter of the H1N1 flu was presenting itself. We engaged in all the appropriate precautions, and for a number of months we didn't notice much unusual activity. But spring saw our health and wellness center jammed with students who were either genuinely sick or thought they were, and we learned all about infection thresholds, sneezing into your elbow - and why it's a good idea to have the graduating seniors reach for the Purel before they reach for their diplomas.

Or me, an expert in double-pane, super-efficient windows? Turns out an involved president walks the grounds with his crack facilities folks and expounds on all sorts of disciplines he knows nothing about - botany (should we be pruning those willows along the river?), electrical engineering (why can't we get another lamp on the southern quad?) and even philosophy (why are brick pathways so much more "campusy" than concrete?). If he's nimble enough, he learns to handle an industrial-strength griddle to cook pancakes for his students at the start of finals week. If he's delusional enough he might even consider, after a tough loss, drawing up a special play for the football team (my very successful coach says I can submit exactly one; I'm still working on it).

In the months before I came to St. Norbert, I made a point of visiting with a number of university presidents I've known and respected. I wanted their perspective on the top job, and they were most generous with great advice, ranging from key-personnel evaluation to trustee relationships to keeping your marriage strong. But each president made one point in particular: Figure out how to manage all the demands on your time. That will prove crucial to staying focused on your handful of true priorities, they said, not to mention keeping you sane.

It was prescient advice. Even so, no amount of warning can truly prepare a new president for the sheer onslaught of calls, visits, invitations, emails and correspondence that awaits.

Notwithstanding all the homework you've done, those initial months make you acutely aware of how little you really know your new institution. You want to catch up--you need to catch up--in a hurry. Hundreds of people want to see you, whether out of courtesy or necessity, and of course you want to be as accommodating as possible. After all, wasn't your "openness" one of the reasons they hired you in the first place? So you kid yourself into thinking you can engage all comers.

It was maybe two months into my hectic new life that the reality of the treadmill hit me in the most basic way: One day it dawned on me that I literally was having trouble finding time to go to the bathroom. I may not be the sharpest toothpick in the box, but even I knew that was nature's way of telling me my schedule was overcrowded (just like my experienced staff had been trying to tell me), and I began to dial back a bit.

The demands for face-time are only compounded by the deluge of information and data washing across your desk. The endless correspondence and paperwork, the industry reading and the divisional reports, the many things that need your signature - it's overwhelming and at times dispiriting. Much of the material is of marginal utility, but

much of it isn't. And at least in the beginning, you don't know which is which.

And that's all before you get to email, which is incessant and insidious, especially when you try to be conscientious about answering it, as I am.

One evening, blurry-eyed, I went into my "Sent" folder and counted up all the emails I'd written. Then I dashed off a final one, irony intended, to a colleague: "This is the 73rd e-mail I've written today!" Many of these were little more than terse acknowledgements, to be sure, but plenty of them were the sorts of mini-essays and substantive epistles that actually require some presidential thought and time to construct. I came to laugh when people asked me if I "missed" writing. The fact is, I was now doing more writing than I ever had in my "writing" life!

(In fairness to my hard-working and no doubt bemused team, I also came to realize that even in cyberspace you reap what you sow, and I must resolve to reduce the email traffic I instigate myself!)

At least I had the wit and management experience to know that such time-eaters, however well-intended, can easily pull you away from your larger priorities. And as I arrived at St. Norbert, there were many important academic initiatives that our faculty, under the leadership of the academic dean, were considering and implementing.

These included, but were not limited to: putting even more rigor into our Honors program; conducting a thorough review of our general-education curriculum; requiring a demonstrated competency in a second language for our students; and working to give our young faculty earlier opportunities for research, to promote a quicker rise through the ranks. The new president had to get up to speed on all these issues and provide input without undermining faculty or deanly prerogatives. At same time, I was dramatically ratcheting up our efforts to make St. Norbert more diverse in its makeup and more multicultural in its outlook.

Then too, I learned that sometimes a president simply has to be the institution's father or mother figure. When late in the fall semester some of our students were involved in a rash of alcohol-related incidents that I felt had gotten out of hand, I decided to let them know I was paying attention – and that, in this rare instance, they were letting us down.

"No one wishes to deprive you of a social life ... but blatantly irresponsible behavior can never be excused away," I wrote the student community, adding: "Part of the bargain in coming to St. Norbert is to comport yourself as the kind of student we expect you to be. Violate the law or abuse campus guidelines for personal conduct and you can expect serious consequences As we move toward semester's end, remember: Stay safe, stay grounded, stay healthy – and stay here."

The actual miscreants amounted to a tiny fraction of our student body, of course. But after sending the note I heard from so many students, faculty, staff and parents that I knew the larger message had been both received and appreciated.

One of the largest freshmen lessons had to do with my transition from a public university to a faith-based private college. At St. Norbert, we not only can pray, we do so with some frequency. Any gathering of real consequence will begin with a prayer, which helps keep our mission central to all we do. So it is that I'm often called upon to pull down the

"prayer in chief" hat from the presidential hat rack. I don't mind saying that that took a little getting used to-although I must also admit it was nowhere near as difficult as cleaning up my oid newsroom vocabulary, still very much a work in progress.

A St. Norbert signature moment occurs every Wednesday morning at 10. This is campus' Sacred Hour, a time the institution sets aside for personal reflection. We don't hold classes. We discourage meetings and other real business. We want our faculty, staff and students to take that time to meditate, take a walk, talk with a friend, pray, or just reflect on the things that are truly important.

Many also elect to observe Sacred Hour by attending our Common Prayer service. This is an eclectic, reflection-based gathering held in our beautiful campus church. Different individuals and constituencies take responsibility for Common Prayer, which lends each one a freshness and unpredictability even as it reinforces our collective obligation to the college mission.

Such an unusual commitment by a college takes work, and it takes leadership example. So I volunteered to sponsor a Common Prayer of my own. I decided to focus it on a book I'm working on about the life, stories and truths of the great nonfiction writer Joseph Mitchell.

One thing that has always struck me about Mitchell's work is how, even as he conveyed the humor and pathos in his subjects, he was even more careful to convey their fundamental humanity and dignity. His misfits and iconoclasts are certainly characters but they are not caricatures, and they are not to be underestimated. Without saying it explicitly, Mitchell reminded the reader that we are indeed all God's children. (If this intrigues you, I encourage you to pick up Mitchell's majestic anthology, "Up in the Old Hotel," sometime and see for yourself.)

Such was the message of my Common Prayer. Surrounded in the church by hundreds of students, faculty and staff, my vice presidential colleagues and I read from amusing and poignant Mitchell stories. Though not Catholic, Mitchell was a deeply spiritual person with a love for the classic hymns he'd grown up with in his small hometown in rural North Carolina. So I sprinkled my service with some of these, too, including a number we don't hear much in Catholic liturgies.

Thus we closed the service with a rousing version of "In the Sweet By and By." And as I walked out with my colleagues and my students, I was overtaken by a powerful sense of peace-and belonging.

Maybe I was learning, by and by, the largest lesson of all: As president, you basically do what can, and the rest will take care of itself.

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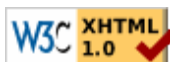
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