

RICHARD GUARASCI

# On the Challenge of Becoming the Good College

*City of Ships! . . .  
City of the world (for all races are here,  
all the lands of the earth make contributions  
here;)  
City of the Sea! City of Hurried and Glittering  
Tides!  
—WALT WHITMAN, “City of Ships”*

THE WATERS of New York Harbor tell a story. As you study their “scalped-edged waves,” you see and hear the legacy of the American democratic experience. Gaze deeply and you will experience the hopes and dreams, the tears of joy, pain, and injustice that call back to you from every ethnic and racial group sailing to America in pursuit of political freedom, religious tolerance, and economic opportunity. One might even say that the waters where the Hudson accepts the sea serve as a mirror of our history, of ourselves, and of the college that overlooks the harbor.

Wagner College struggled mightily to find its way in Whitman’s “meddlesome, mad, extravagant city.” Like so many of our institutions, Wagner began with noble purpose and determined leadership. It started on a financial shoestring and many prayers. By the 1950s, it had gained something of regional prominence but, in midlife crisis, lost its bearings in the 1970s and 1980s and only barely managed to stay afloat. With new fire in its boilers, Wagner is again underway, driven by a talented and focused faculty and administration,

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a leading-edge curriculum of its own making, and the high and reasonable expectation that it will continue to fill its bunkers with the human and financial resources needed to fuel future success.

The challenge of profound curriculum reform was inescapable for Wagner. Unlike many institutions that tinker with course offerings, we knew that the salvation of our college could come only through dramatic refocusing and revitalization of not just what we teach, but the way we teach. Others—teams of consultants with massive infusions of foundation support—could not do it for us. The resurrection of Wagner College came from within, and the essential ingredients were remarkable vision, commitment, and leadership shared by faculty and administrators alike.

## The Wagner Plan

By late 1996, it was apparent to all that Wagner faced serious straits. Enrollment was stagnant, debt was mounting, and alumni support was waning. Though the college had completed a major redesign of its campus core and added a new sports/recreation facility, the campus ethos was depressed. Our board of trustees and our president fully understood the imperative for change. They knew that the college’s future success was tightly bound to its New York City location; to its dedicated faculty who understood the mutuality among the liberal arts, professional education, and service; and to the need to provide leadership. In that context, I was hired as Wagner’s provost.

The Wagner Plan for the Practical Liberal Arts was conceived as part of the provost search process and subsequent conversation in February 1997. It was designed that spring



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and, after two non-voting faculty forums were held in September, it passed overwhelmingly. A miracle for sure. Since Wagner was formerly a Lutheran institution, maybe some historic divine intervention lingered over the place.

In short, the faculty sought an educational signature for Wagner College by linking the classroom with “experiential learning” in New York City and its environs. All students would complete a freshman program including a multidisciplinary learning community (approximately twenty-four to twenty-eight students), a reflective tutorial with thirty hours of experiential learning, and an intensive writing program of multiple assignments. Active learning would be the operative pedagogy. All of this would be taught by teams of two tenured or tenure-track faculty members who also serve as the students’ academic advisors until they declare a major by sophomore year.

In addition, all students would complete a multidisciplinary intermediate learning community before their senior year, emphasizing curricular integration. During their senior

year, students would participate in a learning community in their major area that,

through a capstone course, would reintegrate the major subfields. The capstone course would be coupled with a major reflective tutorial including at least one hundred hours of related fieldwork and a senior paper (thesis). The college would no longer count credit hours (seat time). Instead, students would be required to successfully complete thirty-six courses, including a general education core drawn across the five major curricular areas, two courses that address domestic and global diversity, at least one history course, and at least one writing-intensive English literature course.

The changes included many other significant variations. The teaching load would now include seven semester courses over two semesters. Previously, it required eight semester courses over two semesters. The teaching schedule changed, although not sufficiently. In the fall of 1998, the freshman program was implemented, planning for the intermediate and senior learning communities continued, the writing center was dramatically enhanced, and the library was reinvigorated. New furniture was purchased for almost every classroom. As one administrator quipped, “we changed everything but the parking spaces.”

Wagner’s commitment to the learning community model pervades the administration as well. We purposefully strive, through observation and reflection, to understand the process of our evolution. In so doing, we become better prepared to address the far more challenging task: sustaining curricular transformation through broadened faculty engagement. Some lessons have become apparent.

### **Lesson #1: Fundamental educational reform is, at root, the rediscovery of intellectual integrity and collaborative faculty work.**

The work of meaningful progress in higher education, particularly at midsize and smaller institutions, must focus on identifying and reaffirming the essential elements of the institution’s core mission: the dedication to student learning and intellectual inquiry. And the defining element of this equation rests on the inspiration of faculty members as agents of intellectual inquiry. Virtually every one of them chose higher education because of their passion for inquiry, discovery, and the integration

### WAGNER COLLEGE

	1997	2005
Undergraduate Enrollment FTE	~ 1200	~ 2000
SAT	1000	1130
High School GPA	80	89
Permanent Faculty	78	100
Tenure-Track FTE Faculty	~ 100	~ 130
Semester Course Load	4 courses per semester	3 courses per semester *
Students/NYC Metro	65%	15%
Students Outside NY	20%	62%
Resident Students	50%	80%
Retention to Sophomore	70%	90%
Endowment	\$3m	\$27m
Public Service/Experiential Hours	~ 10,000	80,000 annually
Annual Operating Budget	\$24m	\$65m

\* In 2005, approximately 50 percent of the faculty have the option of a three-course load; the strategic goal of the college is to have *all* faculty on a three-course load per semester—a 25 percent change in a decade.



of knowledge. All educational change on these types of campuses will more likely succeed when teachers continue to be learners. When faculty members reignite their resource with learning, to paraphrase Alfred North Whitehead (1929), their enthusiasm for the adventure with ideas becomes infectious for the entire campus. The starting point for meaningful reform begins with affirming this key element of the academic workplace. Without it, reform will lay stillborn or, at most, become marginal. By reaffirming the centrality of learning, the reform agenda starts with the restoration of dignity to faculty work and the higher education profession. In this sense, all meaningful curricular and educational change is ultimately about academic integrity.

Often this need not require large—or any—infusions of funding. I realize this may be heretical in some administrative quarters, but truth be told, change begins by sewing together the disparate parts of academic life into one whole fabric—albeit not new, but much

improved. Fundamental educational reform, particularly along the lines set forth in the Association of American Colleges and Universities's *Greater Expectations* report (2002), rests on the acknowledgement and the idea that college and university faculty members belong to a profession, one dedicated to teaching, scholarship, and service. We are not independent artisans, free from obligations to one another or to our students. Meaningful curricular and educational change begins with this new or rediscovered identity and it moves to honing a "reflective practice" along the lines of what Donald Schon (1983) imagined in his portrait of the reflective practitioner. Through the development of the Wagner Plan, the faculty in fact were creating for themselves (without formal acknowledgement) their own learning community. They were discovering each other's disciplines and, through the applied fieldwork component, they were engaged in a new process of inquiry and discovery.

**Lesson #2: Significant curriculum and institutional change does not require large additional sums of new funding. In fact, external funding may inhibit real change.**

In the early years of the Wagner Plan, none of the initial change was funded by external grants. Change was funded first by reorganizing academic work (e.g., substituting the reflective tutorials for English composition, etc.), freeing up resources and redeploying them to this key first-year program and all its cognates in academic support and the library. Notice there was no new technology input and, sadly, no real money for student services. All of this would come in larger quantities as the plan realized success and was extended to the senior year.

Secondly, millions of dollars in net tuition revenue were realized by increasing student retention from freshman to sophomore year from the high 60 percent levels to, ultimately, 90 percent (after 2003).

**Real reform is rooted in reestablishing the integrity and mutuality of academic work**

Higher retention grew enrollment without increasing financial aid. As the plan's notoriety grew (without a proactive marketing plan) and its reputation developed—first by word of mouth, then in the educational associations and press—enrollment grew by nearly 70 percent in eight years. The impact on the balance sheet was dramatic and, in real terms, the net millions gained in the operating budget would have required something on the order of another \$40–50 million to the endowment in order to realize equivalent investment earnings.

Over the next eight years, these net funds served to increase the size of the tenure-track faculty by over 25 percent; expand the library staff; significantly fund information technology needs; lower the average teaching load by over 12.5 percent; fund more faculty scholarship support; create a writing center with a permanent staff; and fund an office of experiential learning to avail all faculty members and students with required placements in the freshman and senior programs as well as in the regular internship, practicum, and mentorship programs.

**Lesson #3: Real shared governance starts with the enhancement of faculty voice; participation and responsibility; and shared obligations for teaching and learning founded on inquiry, discovery, and creativity in intellectual work.**

The faculty of the emerging academy is composed of professionals—scholars, teachers, citizens—who move from the position of independent, non-aligned artisans to a new identity of what William Sullivan (2004) has called “civic professionals.” Individualist professionals seek as much autonomy as possible and no responsibility to their clients, patients, or publics. Civic professionals seek the highest levels of excellence in their work and the greatest sense of obligation and service to their patients, students, and publics. This is where deep educational reform begins, not as such, but through the venues of common work, mutual respect, and the highest standards of intellectual endeavor.

The professional paradigm that higher education has employed—or attempted to identify—is one of Lockean individualism, where faculty members are accelerated and rewarded for separation, individualism, and discipline as property. This work mode is governed somewhat like Washington politics: create as many veto points as possible with the larger governance structure, ensuring as much autonomy as possible at the highest cost for acquiescence. It doesn't serve the American public very well, and it fails the publics seeking deep learning in higher education. Real educational reform requires more than a system of elementary tenure and other faculty rights and privileges; rather, real reform is rooted in reestablishing the integrity and mutuality of academic work.

**Sustaining change**

By 2005, Wagner College had repositioned itself within higher education through the success of its educational programs, notably in the first- and senior-year programs, as well as in several key major programs. Admissions and retention grew substantially. The student resident population more than doubled in absolute numbers. SAT scores rose well over one hundred points. The financial aid discount remained virtually flat at 30 percent. The student geographic distribution changed dramatically from one of a New York City metro commuter profile to one of a national residential liberal arts college. The embarrassingly low endowment grew ten-fold. The fiscal integrity of the institution was restored. Faculty salaries approached appropriate national and regional benchmarks. Faculty course workloads were



lightened to allow for a greater scholarly commitment while maintaining the extraordinary personal commitment to individual students. Students were graduating in much greater numbers and in four years. Many more were going on to graduate and professional schools, while others were securing meaningful initial employment—often related to their experiential education and service.

Success brings dangers from three vectors. Creating change and seeing initial success is exciting, but what does one do when the newness fades? In any organization, the number of individuals who are personally willing to invest their energies in creating change is limited. How does one broaden the authorship of change among faculty while sustaining the engagement of the early leaders who have labored hard over several years? Finally, how does one manage heightened expectations for increased resources that come with increasing fiscal stability?

Substantive educational reform goes through a number of stages. While not completely discrete, these stages look something like the following:

- vision/inspiration
- adoption
- implementation and its discontents
- good practices and culture shift
- assessment, reflection, revisions
- founders' exhaustion/new generational participation/inherited reform
- the new workplace and the new academy sustaining change, continuing innovation

- creating a culture of perspective and responsible participation in place of entitlement and cynicism
- rising expectations: crisis of resources and/or campus culture

And, of course, each of the stages of change listed above maintains its own dynamic. All of this returns us to first principles in addressing and sustaining educational reform and the new academic workplace.

**Lesson #4: In an era of serious change marked by the absence of intellectual consensus, faculty members are apt to meet new demands with feelings of exhaustion and growing resentment, if there is not solid institutional consensus supporting the efficacy of transformation, if faculty and staff are not celebrated for their achievements, and if tangible improvements in the quality of their professional lives are not forthcoming.**

It might be said that two universal conditions of faculty members are exhaustion and anxiety. No institution is immune. That faculty persevere is testimony to their tremendous dedication to their students. In a real sense, reformers add to the problem by demanding new pedagogies, new disciplines, more exciting but labor-intensive practices, increased participation in campus and community service, infusions of new technologies, and deeper and more rigorous assessments. We add without subtracting. We pride ourselves on greater efficiency, on “doing more with less.” We try to honor too

many goals, too many epochs of intellectual life.

To address these issues, Wagner is engaged in a process that will ultimately reduce faculty workload from seven courses to six. We are creating opportunities for funded continuing professional development. We have created a strategic plan that provides a road map for the college's future. And we engage faculty every step of the way.

**Lesson #5: Intellectual workers—faculty and administrators—need space and time to continue as reflective civic professionals.**

There is no escaping this basic assertion, if we are to continue to structure the academic workplace as we have—tenure, appropriate course loads, scholarly expectations, primary attention to students and student learning. In short, to focus on intellectual integrity as we have practiced it requires innovative means for redefining the new academic workplace and rearranging classroom time, student/mentoring time, and scholarly time.

If we don't, two alternatives are likely. One is the market approach embedded in the "for-profit" proprietary institutions, where part-time labor and technology are substituted for the full-time, tenured academic professional. The second alternative is the withering away of the profession with only a few mandarins left in the tenure stream and the remainder offering teaching services without any scholarly expectation. The separation of scholarship and teaching will eliminate campus intellectual life as we know it by separating inquiry and discovery within the profession of higher education. Neither of these alternatives will likely enhance student learning in any deep sense, although either may improve learned skills in the most pedestrian forms.

At Wagner, we are attempting to address these issues with some sense of urgency and are instituting the following:

- **Mentoring.** Our new provost has implemented both formal and informal mentoring programs for new and older faculty. They meet often, and she holds "open conversations" at her campus home to discuss issues and dynamics as faculty members learn to operate within the Wagner Plan.
- **Informal meetings of varying faculty groups.** Open conversations are held, usually on Thursdays, for differently identified groups of faculty members—professors, the

newly tenured, scientists, etc. The same is done for students.

- **Town meetings.** These are less successful to date. The questions and focus are established by a faculty committee. Sometimes they are gripe sessions, but more recently they have become more substantive on issues—for instance, "defining scholarship."
- **Professional development semester (PDS).** After teaching three years in the first-year program (FYP), faculty members may take a paid, full-semester leave from teaching to pursue scholarly and/or pedagogical work. Alternatively, freshman-year faculty can forgo the PDS and reduce their ongoing teaching load at the outset of their FYP three-year term by one course per year. As the endowment grows in size, and as the faculty roster increases to specifically identified metrics in the strategic plan, all full-time faculty members will teach a three course per semester load, and all FYP faculty participants will receive their PDS leave in three year intervals. The PDS does not substitute for the regular sabbatical program already in place at the college.
- **Scholarship circles.** Led by the provost, this wonderful web of faculty groups and subgroups supports and promotes scholarly work. Many older faculty members as well as newer colleagues find these very helpful and productive, particularly in linking pedagogical innovations to disciplinary interests through the creation of new scholarship.
- **Integrating academic-student initiatives.** There is increased space for aligning student development, cognitive and affective, with both civic and scholarly work. Students see these connections more clearly and directly than many other campus stakeholders. They find learning—inquiry and discovery—in its unmediated forms, wanting to link living and learning in palpable forms.
- **Center for leadership and public service.** A member of Project Pericles, Wagner is deeply committed to not only the practical liberal arts, but also to public service and social justice. Service-learning courses, public service and volunteerism, learning communities with public service components, and senior projects with civic engagement components abound at Wagner. Donors are supporting the creation of a center for leadership and service as a means to

integrate these separate domains of academic life. In Wagner's case, this means directly supporting student and faculty scholarship involved in community problems and initiatives; providing leadership training in public service and civic engagement for students, community leaders, and interested faculty members; and hosting external groups from colleges interested in sharing and exploring the scholarship and practice of civic engagement.

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**Lesson #6: Meaningful educational reform and resulting success exponentially increase campus expectations. Managing rising expectations with rising resources creates equally compelling obstacles to continued success.**

Where is my new computer? Why doesn't the college have more servers in IT? Why does the roof leak in my classroom? What do you mean you don't have vegan offerings at lunchtime in the student dining hall? Do you really believe the faculty will all get the six-course annual teaching load in my lifetime? How come we don't have even more funds for faculty research? Why aren't there more single rooms in the residence halls? Why isn't the endowment more than \$100 million right now? I've got a great new idea for a team-taught requirement in my discipline. We need even more diversity. What do you mean you're giving 8 percent increases to the faculty salary pool? I'm still underpaid. Why can't students take free extra courses if they want to?

Sound familiar? Those are the sounds of success. While making meaningful educational reform may require little or no new funding, sustaining change requires new and robust resources. To realize new ambitions, most of them healthy ones, new resources are needed for key components of learning from new classroom technologies, better fieldwork support systems, greater scholarly needs, and most certainly to repair leaking roofs.

The challenge for administrative leadership requires the ability to focus on bringing diverse ambitions into common and understandable goals, while including the campus community in their revolution. Stated another way, successful reform requires determined, informed, and sensitive leaders—and a strategically and actively engaged board of trustees—who are skilled in their relationships with ambitious and inspired internal and external constituencies.

Humor, food with meetings, and an open mind are helpful for all of us who aspire to lead sustained institutional transformation. □

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