

REMEMBERING A DECADE (Reflections of Dr. William J. Farrell)

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In October 2010, President William Farrell announced plans to retire at the end of the 2010-2011 academic year. The College's 11th president, Dr. Farrell was the first male and the first layperson to lead Rivier. In a Q & A session, Dr. Farrell reflected on his time at the College.



Q. In an interview shortly after you accepted the presidency, you outlined your goals for carefully structured enrollment growth and program development that highlighted the relevance of the liberal arts to students interested in career preparation. How effectively do you believe Rivier has met those goals?

A. The landscape has changed quite a bit since I got here. If you include the year I was interim president, I've been here for a decade. I think the biggest change has really been in terms of academic programs. If you go back over that period of time, this was primarily a liberal arts college. We had education, business and nursing programs, but they were separate from the liberal arts. Nursing was off in St. Joseph Hospital—that isn't the case anymore. Today, the hospital equipment is here. Simulation mannequins and healthcare equipment have become an integral part of our campus.

Education has become very expensive and Rivier had to take that into account. In addition to the liberal arts, we needed to focus on professional studies as well. A good example is the five-year program that allows students to earn an M.B.A. in just one year after completing a bachelor's. Many of our nursing students go on to get an M.B.A.—they see it as related to their profession, they recognize that healthcare facilities need people who understand management. It isn't just attracting nursing graduates, we're seeing that focus on business with everything. It doesn't mean the liberal arts are going to go away—they're integrated. Business isn't just about business. It's also about values. That shift in focus has been one of the biggest changes and I think that will continue.

Economics are part of that as well, and we do a great deal to ensure institutional success. We're very interested in fiscal issues, we work hard at that. The viability of the institution depends on that, not just for us, but for everyone. Enhancing the quality of education while maintaining an eye on finance is the future of education. That challenge isn't going to go away—those who don't pay attention to that demand aren't going to be around.

Q. What do you see as some of the most significant changes at Rivier over the last ten years?

A. There were some challenges when I came here. Those challenges required a major planning effort, which took place before I arrived. Under those economic circumstances, planning was fine. What the planners wanted to do was good, but we had to invest in the institution to be able to accomplish what they wanted to do. We had to make sure we had the resources in place to do so.

That's one of the reasons the College launched its first capital campaign, which helped us accomplish what had been planned—improving the library, renovation of the residence halls, expanding the Muldoon Center, making an investment in a variety of ways in academic programs. We have the business department's ability to bring to campus what happens on Wall Street through a ticker that displays real-time financial data. We have all the changes I mentioned in nursing. We've developed the first doctoral program in education in the state, a sign of our commitment to education. Clearly, we have invested in that not just with facilities, but with program excellence as well. The College wanted to do the right things. That meant addressing the fiscal issues.

Q. What most stood out to you about Rivier College?

A. I think one of the things that was very important here was the character of the institution. That has always been a part of the College—its role as a Catholic institution and focus on values. That character is still a critical factor that affects the style of life on campus. It's a distinctive factor—there is a focus on mission and on volunteerism that is an integral part of the College. That makes it different from other institutions. We reach out on a broader scale. Last summer we had a contingent from China representing higher education on campus to learn about higher education in this country. We're seeing more of that kind of outreach and involvement.

My wife, Carol, and I were impressed by the depth of mission infiltrating campus life—not just being Catholic, but more than that. The set of values and style of life on campus are different than those at other institutions. I was also impressed by the relationships between faculty, staff and students that

plays an important part in retention here. We have students who come here because they want that kind of support. That's an integral part of the character of the College. »

Q. You've mentioned before that you always wanted to be president of a Catholic college—in what ways has your Rivier experience differed from your previous experience being president of a school with no religious affiliation?

A. The institution where I spent a fair amount of time was the University of Iowa, a very powerful institution, a major research institution. The school had a wonderful writing program and a number of colleges—nursing, medicine, to name a few. It was very career-oriented, particularly in the health fields. But there can't be the kind of one on one contact between faculty and staff and students like there is at Rivier. It's not that they don't care about students at the University of Iowa, it's just a big place. The personal quality we talked about here is prized by students who attend Rivier.

One of the reasons I didn't become president of a Catholic institution until late in my career is that Catholic schools were headed up by members of religious communities. Today that isn't as common. They still serve many different roles. More and more you see presidents of religious institutions who are Catholic, but not priests or Sisters. If you go back 25 years, that wasn't the case. These days, the leadership includes the laity.

Q. How did your background prepare you to be Rivier's president?

A. After a year as a visiting faculty member at the University of California Berkeley, my alma mater, Marquette University, asked me to come back as an associate professor of English. Marquette is a Jesuit university, and of course, a Catholic institution. I did not stay in the classroom for a long period of time. The president of the University asked me to become the director of Foundation Development for fundraising. As an administrator I decided to pursue an M.B.A. Why? Because the world I was moving in required an understanding of management. I'm glad I did that. What I learned as an academic and as an administrator came together.

In 1984, I came to Plymouth State College with Carol, where I was president. Eventually, I moved on to become Chancellor of the University System. I never got away from the money issue—what does the Chancellor do? Spend a lot of time with the state legislature discussing budgets. It happened during my time at Rivier, too.

The skills I learned were important for dealing with the changes in education and the changes I was experiencing in my life. Just as the nurses have to expand their skills, so do the professors of English. Students are learning you can't just be one thing, you have to expand your skills. Writing is important and you have to learn math. The liberal arts are very important to the professional programs and vice versa. Over the last decade, the programs here at Rivier have evolved to reflect that interdependence. The distinction between the liberal arts and professional studies is not what it was—things are different today. That change is less tangible than some of the other things we've accomplished, such as successfully completing our first capital campaign and improving facilities on campus such as Regina Library, but I think that lessening the division between programs is an important shift.

Q. What do you hope people will most remember about your leadership at Rivier?

A. I hope people will remember that as we dealt with challenges here, sometimes it demanded that we do challenging things. I always felt that faculty and staff understood what the administration was doing. I always felt like I had support of the people here. That has certainly been true in recent years dealing with economic challenges. The institution has been able to grow in strength, meet the needs of students, and do some very good things.

Q. What do you see as the greatest challenges facing your successor? What do you see as the greatest challenges facing Rivier during the next 5 – 10 years?

A. I think the new leadership will interpret what's most important, as I did. It's good to get all that information about the issues he or she will have to deal with out in the open. There has been an effort by the Chair of our Board of Trustees to involve as many people as possible in this transition—no one is left out. I think it's important for people to talk about what's going to matter in the next 10 years, such as the role of online learning, shifts in technology, and changes in the demographics of the students Rivier serves.

Q. What will you miss most about Rivier?

A. Before I came here, my world was very different. I had been at larger institutions—they weren't places where you could work closely with all of the people around you. That was true of Marquette and the University of Iowa. There's nothing wrong with that, but those places aren't as personal as Rivier. The sense of community here was something Carol and I both liked very much.

I always appreciated the fact that when I walk around campus, students know who I am and say hello. That wouldn't have happened at the other schools where I've worked. The other institutions I've been at have been less personal. That's not a criticism—just a difference. But I will miss that personal element at Rivier. ■

Praise for the President

When Dr. Farrell announced his retirement plans to faculty and staff at an assembly in October, Dr. Jamison Hoff, Chair of the Board of Trustees, praised his leadership at Rivier. "The only word that really reflects his leadership here is transformation," she says. "We have been able to reinvest each year in the institution. He has provided strong fiscal leadership as a result of his wisdom, experience, and skill." Some of those investments in the College included renovations to the residence halls and the Dion Center, turfing the athletic field, and an addition to Regina Library. "The transformation he has effected here will not only live on in academic program changes and finances, but in physical changes on campus," Dr. Hoff says.

In February 2011, the Board of Trustees named Dr. Farrell President Emeritus.