New Directions for Undergraduates

By Dana L. Cooke

Syracuse University will embark on a program of bold new initiatives in undergraduate education, promising to make Syracuse one of the most distinguished undergraduate institutions in the nation. Guiding each of these initiatives is the vice president for undergraduate studies.

Ron Cavanagh has a new job. He has moved into a new office, rearranged the furniture, and filled the walls with his art. Photos of the Cavanaghs rest on his bookshelf.

But as much as Cavanagh has reoriented the office to suit his tastes and exorcise its earlier occupants, he'll never do the same with the job itself, because no one has ever held Cavanagh's job before. It's brand new.

It's brand new at Syracuse, and it's new in virtually all of American higher education. If there were an annual conference for people with similar assignments, Cavanagh would likely be the only one there.

Ronald R. Cavanagh is the vice president for undergraduate studies. Formerly associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, he has held this new job since July.

Cavanagh's purview includes the entirety of undergraduate education at Syracuse. This seems a natural division of responsibility at an institution such as Syracuse, which does, after all, educate a fair number of undergraduates. So it might seem surprising that the post hasn't existed before.

But traditionally, at Syracuse and elsewhere, the day-to-day responsibility for undergraduate education has belonged to the deans of the individual schools and colleges. The creation of a central administrative post to address undergraduate education as an all-University enterprise is more remarkable than it at first appears.

Although the position has existed for only eight months, it has already become the focus of a revolution in undergraduate education that has been brewing for several years. Good ideas are gathering in Cavanagh's office as fast as they can be given names.

Though the vice presidency is new to Syracuse, undergraduate education is not. SU was founded as an undergraduate institution, and as late as 1945 undergrads held a 10-to-1 majority. But that has changed. A member of the Association of American Universities, SU is increasingly prominent as a graduate institution. The number of graduate students stands at nearly 4,500, and research funding is on the rise.

What makes Syracuse unusual is that the advance of graduate programs has not overshadowed undergraduate programs. Undergraduate enrollment remains steady at nearly 12,000, and more than 200 undergraduate degree programs are offered.

Some of the most important innovations in undergraduate education during the past 10 years have been born at Syracuse. In the late 1970s, for example, the College of Arts and Sciences introduced the Liberal Arts Core, an imaginative and flexible program of fundamental liberal arts requirements for undergraduates. The core addressed national concern over the fate of liberal learning before the topic was even making headlines.

Three years ago, SU instituted the "Mellon project," a collection of faculty seminars and new undergraduate curricula intended to redefine the relationship between professional and liberal education. This project is the subject of national scrutiny, and, like the Liberal Arts Core, has already established a legacy.

Add to those highlights the introduction of academic programs to the residence halls, the
bolstering of counseling programs, the development of new interdisciplinary programs, and others. While research gets the headlines, SU’s attention to teaching, particularly at the undergraduate level, has rarely been so intense.

“We are a graduate and research university,” says Gershon Vincow, vice chancellor for academic affairs, “but we are not turning our backs on 115 years of history in which, for the most part, we were an undergraduate college or collection of colleges.

“We are continuing to develop our undergraduate programs,” he says. “The establishment of this position puts increased emphasis on the quality of the undergraduate experience, even as we move forward in other areas.”

The job description of the vice president for undergraduate studies is straightforward, giving little indication of its implications. The responsibilities include

- supervising various all-University programs and services, such as the Center for Instructional Development and the Honors Program;
- providing a focal point for interaction among deans and between the deans and the central administration; and
- developing new initiatives and policies pertaining to undergraduate education, while generally encouraging and representing quality in undergraduate teaching.

The first assignment is largely bureaucratic. Programs that transcend school/college boundaries need a place to report, and Cavanagh’s office makes sense. Such programs as ROTC and the new all-University writing program can now be integrated with the larger priorities of undergraduate education.

The other two assignments represent the heart of Cavanagh’s function. The first is essentially reactive; Cavanagh is expected to listen to the deans, understand what is going on in their schools and colleges, and to keep an eye open for good ideas that might be adopted on a University-wide basis.

“The deans all get along pretty well,” says one of them, Edward C. Stephens of the Newhouse School, “but each dean has more things to do than he has time to do them, and rarely has time to get outside of his or her own school. But I can go talk to Cavanagh about what people are doing in the other schools.”

“What we do now is to expose the ears of the deans to the concerns of all the others,” is how Cavanagh puts it.
As much as he helps others interact, Cavanagh is expected to develop and implement good ideas of his own. The power is in his perspective. As an administrator of undergraduate education representing the entire University, he can see the forest as well as the trees. His visionary role is to make connections—to discover ways that undergraduate programs throughout SU share common concerns and ways in which they might be improved across the board.

“The vice presidency gives us interactive structures for a variety of opportunities, programs, and, indeed, for the investigation of problems that cut across schools,” Vincow adds. “There are many cross-college curricular concerns and new programs that could not be created unless we had an officer of the institution who was responsible for them.”

Cavanagh sees his goals extending beyond classroom activities. “A student’s undergraduate work is a period of serious academic study, but it is also a time to learn about life and culture,” he says. “Students should be well-rounded and participate in extracurricular athletic, cultural, and social programs. It is part of my job to harmonize all these elements in the total undergraduate experience.”

Thomas F. Cummings Jr., vice president for enrollment management and continuing education, interprets Cavanagh’s role as one of personalizing. “Prospective students and their parents perceive Syracuse as a large place. It’s not always believable until you’ve been here a while that it can be a smaller and manageable place,” he says. “The vice president will be one of the most important people who monitor the quality and relevancy of an undergraduate’s education.”

David Smith, dean of admissions and financial aid, agrees. “For a prospective student on the outside looking in, I think it would be a comfort to see that there is a person at this institution acting in that stewardship role.”

To gain a better understanding of the vice president’s role, one needs only examine a few of the projects Cavanagh has instituted or plans to institute soon. Some of them are born of his personal insights; most come from the various deans and program directors who meet with him frequently. These ideas exist in the University community, Cavanagh explains, and find a place to take root in the Office of Undergraduate Studies. They tap a lot of existing wisdom.

*The Gateway Faculty Project.* Cavanagh is focusing on the freshman and sophomore years as crucially important; he calls them the Gateway Years. “I want to review all the major courses in all the schools and colleges that lower-division students take,” he says, “and I want to find out who is teaching those courses, with the direct request of the deans that they allocate the best of their faculty members to the instruction of those classes. I want to make sure that we have our most experienced faculty members teaching freshmen from the time they arrive on campus.”

Hand-in-glove with this is the introduction of new procedures for choosing and preparing graduate teaching assistants. “Any T.A. in contact with undergraduates will have passed through a University-run orientation and monitoring program,” Cavanagh explains. The program will begin this summer.

*The Academic Preceptor Program.* One of the freshest ideas is the notion of inviting undergraduate students who have completed a Gateway Course to return as a mentor. Students who perform exceptionally well in a course will conduct small “reading parties” in later semesters for students then taking the course. The preceptors will help prepare students for upcoming lectures and exams and generally diffuse the tensions of cutting into unfamiliar intellectual territory.

“The preceptors will be deployed to help students understand,” Cavanagh says, “but they themselves will have an opportunity to learn the material in a way that only teaching can provide. . . . In the long run, this will fundamentally transform their own undergraduate experience, because they will be looking at courses they take through new eyes. They will sense from personal experience just how difficult it is to teach a course and teach it well.”

*Distinguished Teaching Fellowships.* The recipients of these fellowships will be senior faculty members who build year-long programs of investigation for 15 to 20 juniors; the juniors will work with them in a student-mentor relationship. For both faculty members and students, Cavanagh sees a rare opportunity to pursue themes of unusual richness and to do so in a setting that is personal and multifaceted.

*The Fund for Teaching and Curriculum Innovation.* This fund will allow Cavanagh to support projects of special merit, pro-
posed by faculty members and pertaining in virtually any fashion to the improvement of undergraduate teaching. Projects could range from a conference trip to the development of a whole new series of courses.

There are other ideas still: the creation of new interdisciplinary study centers, the development of language houses, better monitoring of orientation and course registration, more use of the Liberal Arts Core in professional schools, and more consistency in advising. These are a few of them.

When Ron Cavanagh discusses any of these initiatives, enthusiasm is obvious in his voice. Enthusiasm is one of the important credentials he brings to his new job. Sincerity is another.

Cavanagh is the rare administrator who, while possessing all the skills, doesn’t seem like an administrator. He has an Irishman’s charm and vitality, and ideas pour from him not in polysyllabic press releases, but naturally, as if the future of higher education were something one would discuss at the bus stop.

When given a tough question, Cavanagh offers responses that seem unthreatening, heartfelt, and right on the mark. These are important attributes for the vice president for undergraduate affairs. Each of the deans and department directors who appears in Cavanagh’s doorway brings a different personality and slightly different agenda, and deriving University-wide consistency from among them requires diplomacy and unswerving conviction.

“For me, it’s very difficult to separate the job from the man who’s in it,” says Dean Stephens. “I don’t know how I’d feel about the position if Ron Cavanagh weren’t there. He’s a man of immense integrity and a genuine straight-shooter.”

Cavanagh joined SU 20 years ago as an instructor in religion and, as an associate professor, chaired the department between 1974 and 1980. After 1980, he was associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences in charge of student services. This was his training ground for his current assignment.

“I can imagine people who are a lot less dynamic than Ron Cavanagh for whom it would have taken two or three years just to become familiar with the programs,” Vincow says. “Ron has been an all-University statesman for many years, involved in many programs. . . . It is natural now that he should take this position.”

Somewhere in this world are the 3,000 12- and 13-year-olds who will enter Syracuse University as freshmen five years from now. Little do they suspect—or probably care at this point—that their undergraduate education is being readied for them.

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By the time they enter SU—and in most cases even sooner—the goals pursued by Cavanagh will have come to fruition. Senior faculty members will teach Gateway Year courses. T.A.s will be better trained and oriented. New relationships between professional and liberal education will be under exploration. Programs in the dorms will complement programs in the classroom like never before. And opportunities to receive and even offer guidance will abound.

“The creation of Ron Cavanagh’s position is crucial to the improvement of undergraduate programs—perhaps the single most important step in that regard,” says David Smith. “We’ve created momentum, a certain degree of motivation, and a functional means to an improved undergraduate experience.”

Last November, when Cavanagh had held his new job five months, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching issued a vast, predominantly critical report on undergraduate education in America. It said that undergraduate institutions are, among other things, confused about goals, hampered by divided loyalties within the faculty, failing to link academic and social life, and maintaining “a disturbing gap between the college and the larger world.” These are all problems that Cavanagh is already addressing.

Syracuse, one of those “major graduate and research institutions,” is quietly becoming an even better place for sophomores and seniors, juniors and freshmen. There are many reasons for this, but none so important as the decision to install a new box on the organizational chart of Syracuse University and label it “vice president for undergraduate studies.”