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Q&A

NVTC sat down with George Mason University President Dr. Ángel Cabrera to discuss his vision for the university, including Mason's partnerships with local businesses, support for entrepreneurs and growing global connections.

By Allison Gilmore

nvtc You just completed your first year as George Mason University's sixth president. What can you tell us about your vision for the university moving forward?

When I arrived about a year ago, I asked our Board of Visitors to give me some time to propose a vision. I spent the first half of the year bringing in the voices of over 4,000 people from inside and outside the university and we condensed that into what is now our vision for the university.

In talking about what is different and unique about Mason, four terms bubbled up to the top of every conversation: innovation, diversity, entrepreneurship and accessibility. It so happens that the words start with the letters I, D, E, A, so we called it the Mason IDEA, which was a great way for everybody to remember the principles.

Innovation is crucial. Education is a sector that is normally bound by tradition. Many universities are constantly referring to their foundational past and their founders. In a way, you become somewhat trapped in that tradition and it can inhibit new ways of going forward. At Mason, we're relatively young, at least in university years. We give ourselves permission to think outside the box. We've always been different, we've always been unique, and that's part of how we define ourselves.

Diversity, after innovation, is probably the word that most people use to describe George Mason University. This region is the American melting pot at its best. That is reflected at Mason, where we have one of the most diverse student bodies in America. And our minority students perform at the same level as the non-minority students, which is very rare among colleges and universities.

We're entrepreneurial because we see ourselves as a university that wants to have an impact around us and to empower people to do things. We see ourselves

as knowledge and thinking in action, turning the research in our labs into new businesses and producing graduates who will not only be able to have good jobs but also create jobs.

And access. Some universities make the decision to restrict access. We've decided that we are a public university and we exist to make a difference in the world. Therefore, we don't define ourselves by how many people we exclude, but by how many we include.

We don't compromise quality at the expense of access. In fact, the quality of our student body has been growing and the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) has found that Mason is the number one university in the Commonwealth in terms of the wages our graduates earn. We want to find ways to serve more students, not fewer, and help them have successful, meaningful lives.

The Mason IDEA defines who we are and what makes us special as an institution. Our objective is not to be better than anybody else, but to be the best university for the world. We are a public entity, we provide a public good.

nvtc Can you talk a little bit about your plans for Mason on a global scale? How do you see the university fitting in globally?

We asked ourselves, to what extent should a public university that is owned by Virginians engage internationally?

We concluded that, in the world we live in, we would not be serving Virginia well if we didn't prepare our students to engage productively with people, institutions and organizations from around the world. The key industries in this region — IT, Internet services, cloud computing, cybersecurity, and defense — are all global industries. Your suppliers may be global, your clients may be global, your partners may be global, and your threats may be global.

In helping Virginia's students experience the world, we have the advantage of location — minutes away from the nation's capital. This is the diplomatic hub of the United States and one of the top diplomatic hubs in the world. Washington, D.C., is the natural bridge between Virginia, other parts of the United States and the rest of the world. That's why we think Mason ought to play a key role in building those connections. And we have been.

We recently entered into an agreement with the Korean government to participate in its new, higher education center in Incheon, where they're bringing together a select group of international universities. This will give us a platform for our students to spend a semester in Asia and attract more Asian students to campus, which will increase the diversity at home, too. It's a great model and one that didn't require any capital investments from the Commonwealth.

We're going to be looking for more of those models. I don't think we see ourselves opening and building campuses. But we're going to find innovative models to allow us to build more global connections in financially viable ways.

nvtc Can you talk about how Mason works with local businesses, particularly technology businesses?

One of the things we do for the business community is to serve as the center of cultural and artistic life in Northern Virginia. The music, theater, opera and dance at the Center for the Arts in Fairfax and the Hylton Performing Arts Center on our Prince William campus in Manassas; the entertainment at the Patriot Center; and the athletic events that happen on campus enrich the life here. When companies decide where to relocate, when they're considering Northern Virginia, a big question on the list is what is it like living here? Is there a rich cultural life? We see ourselves enriching the cultural life of Northern Virginia to help our businesses bring in world-class talent.

But we also want to be an economic engine. The Governor of Virginia has stated that Virginia's economy will need 100,000 new graduates by 2025 just to meet the demands of our industry. We'll be making a significant contribution to achieve that goal. We're now producing a little over 8,000 graduates a year and we want to grow to 12,000 or more. Altogether, we want to produce 100,000 graduates over the next decade for Virginia.

That's probably our biggest contribution to the economy. We're producing talent in the areas that are needed most in Virginia. We're constantly listening to business leaders in the community, trying to find out what type of talent is needed and tailoring our programs to serve those needs. Every year we're launching new programs. For example, this past year we created a whole new initiative in gaming and game design. We brought our business folks, our engineers and our artists together to create an initiative in gaming.

We're also making a critical contribution through research. We have scientists at our Prince William campus in Manassas working in cancer research; in fact, three businesses have spun off of that.

We have researchers working in cybersecurity, and two or three new businesses have spun off of that. We see ourselves as both a partner to existing businesses in producing new ideas and solutions and as an incubator of new businesses.

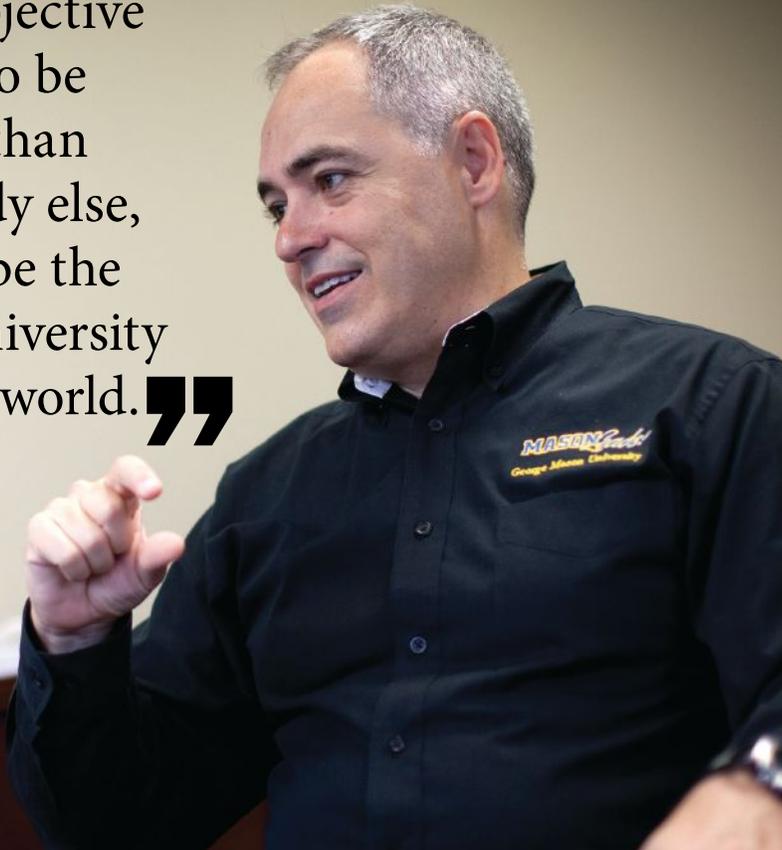
And there is a bigger opportunity in the area of executive and professional education. We provide all the raw talent that goes into the businesses, but we also want to be a partner and design programs specifically to meet needs of businesses.

nvtc Are the spin-offs that you talked about part of a concerted effort focusing on commercialization?

What has happened until now has been more spontaneous than intentional, with entrepreneurs within the university taking the lead. We want to be more intentional and supportive of faculty and student entrepreneurs. We're trying to structure ourselves so that we attract academic entrepreneurs, people with ideas from around the world who want to come to Mason because it's where you can do things, you can commercialize things, you can spin off businesses.

And there are two reasons for that. One is a very pragmatic one — when we succeed in commercializing ideas, we can fund other initiatives at the university. But the second is that doing so is part of our mission. We exist to serve the public good. So if our ideas are good, if the research in our labs is good, it should have an impact.

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nvtc How is George Mason investing in scientific and technological discovery?

Right now George Mason is considered a “high research activity” university by the Carnegie Classification. The maximum classification is “very high research activity.” Our commitment is to become a very high research activity institution because we think that our region needs it.

I don’t think that this should be a universal aspiration for every university in the world. In our case though, when we spoke to the business community around us, we understood that our region is becoming an entrepreneurial hub and that our economy will be driven by entrepreneurial activity and innovation. For this reason, the region needs, at its very core, a very high, intense research institution. That’s what we’re committed to being.

But it’s going to require significant investments. I’ll give you an idea. We are now receiving about \$100 million in federal grants every year. We think a university of our size in a region like this should be doing probably two to three times that much. So we

should go from \$100 million to up to \$300 million or even more. But grants from the federal government do not cover all your costs. In fact, for every dollar you receive, approximately \$.18 is not covered. So the university has to find a way to fund \$.18. If we add \$100 million of research activity at the university, we need to find \$18 million to support it. The bottom line is that we

need to find resources to help us grow our research, and that’s going to require everybody’s help. Not just public money, but also industry money.

Now, every time we conduct research, the spillover effects of that research stay mostly in our region, because if you spin off a company here, the company is going to create jobs in Virginia. All the activity that emanates from that research benefits the community. You have to make an investment to be able to make that happen. For Mason to make that leap into the nation’s top tier of research universities, we need everybody’s support.

nvtc Are you attracting entrepreneurs to come here or are you trying to spur entrepreneurship among your students and faculty? What’s the entrepreneur focus really about?

Last year, the Kauffman Foundation in Kansas City, which is

probably the biggest think tank for entrepreneurship in America, published a study with a map of the United States showing the regions that are attracting entrepreneurs, as well as the regions that are losing entrepreneurs. Right now, the national capital region is the most attractive area for entrepreneurs.

Interestingly, the Kauffmann Foundation also found that more than half of businesses that are created in Silicon Valley have at least one founder that was not born in the United States. So what has happened in Silicon Valley, which is common to other entrepreneurial clusters, is that it’s becoming a magnet of talent from other regions in America and around the world. When Kauffman asked those founders, they didn’t say they came to Silicon Valley to create a business. They say they came there to study, to go to Stanford, or Caltech, or Berkeley, or another top university there.

So whether it’s Northern California, or the Boston-Cambridge cluster, there are always world-class research universities at the heart of these entrepreneurial clusters. That’s why it is essential

for Northern Virginia to have a world-class research university. By becoming a world-class research university, we become a magnet for talent.

We also want to be structured in a way that, whether you're a student or faculty member, if you have ideas that can be turned into businesses, there are as few hurdles and barriers as possible. We're thinking about creating spaces, innovation labs in Arlington, Fairfax and Prince William where entrepreneurs, whether they are home grown or from other places, can create new ideas.

being able to work in a group. Further down the list are technical skills related to a specific business or the ability to program a computer in a specific language. It's not that those aren't important. But when you ask employers, what they want more than anything are those broader skills that are absolutely central.

We're in the business of helping educate citizens who can build a thriving democracy and community. Those people need to have the right values, a broad set of skills and understanding of the world they live in in order to do or create a job. We think that to be able to

do a job is part of being a good citizen. So we pride ourselves in producing nurses, teachers, computer programmers, engineers and people who do good jobs.

We're partnering with the community college and with businesses to find out what skill sets employers need. At the same time, we're not losing track of the fact that the best thing we can do for our students is to give them a broad set of skills and allow them to learn.



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nvtc Is there anything else that you want to share with our readers?

I want to emphasize two things. Number one is that we are your university. We do not exist in a vacuum; we are a public entity and we exist to serve our community.

Number two is that this university has achieved much in its 40-year history. We have grown to become the largest university in the Commonwealth, we produced the Commonwealth's first two Nobel laureates, and we're ranked by SCHEV as the university that is producing the best-paid graduates in the Commonwealth, with one of the lowest in-state tuitions. Those achievements, and many others, are just amazing. Many people ought to share in the pride, because these achievements didn't come out of nowhere. They belong to the entire community.

We still have a lot to do and we cannot do anything without help. So we're going to be knocking on doors, calling meetings and putting all hands on deck. We want to serve the community, but we need the community's help and investment. **nvtc**

We're constantly surveying our employers or reviewing other studies that look at what skills employers need. At the top of the list are skills like being able to communicate verbally and in writing, being able to analyze data, being able to resolve complex problems, and

The other thing we're doing is trying to figure out how to connect all those pieces. We have the Mason Enterprise Center, with incubators at various locations where we're serving and supporting local entrepreneurs.

So whether it's the programs we teach, the scientists we attract, or the incubators that we build, we're being more strategic about how to connect all those dots to produce more entrepreneurial activity.

nvtc How do Mason's academic offerings help to prepare the next generation workforce?

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