It’s a pleasure to welcome you to the College’s annual Christmas gathering. As I did in September at our last college faculty meeting, I’d like to again thank my colleagues in the Office of the Dean for their hard work in the many activities of the office and for your gracious welcome. I’d especially like to thank Harriet Baldwin, the impresario of not only this afternoon’s event but so many of the conferences, lectures, and panels that nourish our common intellectual life. As some of you know, Harriet has battled through a round of chemotherapy this year. I’m delighted that her most recent medical news is so encouraging, and I’d like you to join me in congratulating and thanking her.

Thank all of you, too, for your presence this afternoon and for this opportunity to reflect together on the current state of the College and some of our aspirations for its future.

Let’s begin with the room. I mean this literally. McKenna Hall, then called the Center for Continuing Education, opened its doors in 1966. One way to date the room is to see with fresh eyes its mock United Nations style, in its way a period piece of the Cold War, with the microphones at each of the near desks and the possibilities for simultaneous translation in the secure and mysterious control room on the second floor.

But a more important context is less obvious. The first major conference held in this room, in 1966, was also the first major assembly reflecting on the meaning of the Second Vatican Council, which had concluded only a few months before, in December 1965. The conference included the American Jesuit theologian John Courtenay Murray and other intellectual luminaries active at the council, still dazzled, perhaps even disoriented, by what now seems the single most important religious event of the 20th century.

Their host was Notre Dame’s own Fr. Hesburgh, whose continued presence on campus, whose presence in this room, provides us with an extraordinary link between institutional present and past. By 1966 he was already a well-known figure. He had chaired a United States Civil Rights Commission that courageously focused attention on racial discrimination in the apartheid American South and in the country’s northern cities, won for Notre Dame
a transforming set of grants from the Ford Foundation, and made it to the cover of *Time* magazine.¹

Hesburgh’s intense desire to better Notre Dame mirrored the aspirations of the council. Many of its leading theologians had lived through the second world war in Europe. They emerged scarred by that experience and concerned that many Catholics had not more forcibly resisted fascism and its horrific effects. Perhaps the most important message to be gleaned from the council was a plea that Catholics, perhaps especially those Catholics, like ourselves, blessed with extraordinary material resources, not retreat from the world but rather share in the hopes and anxieties of all humans and engage the world so as to better it.

So, too, Hesburgh for Notre Dame. The challenge, he thought, was not simply to build a good Catholic college. There were, there are, many Catholic colleges. The challenge was to become the preeminent Catholic university in the world, dedicated to research as well as teaching and recognized in the same breath as Chicago, Yale, and Stanford. Here, too, the task was to engage the world so as to better it and to do so from within one of the world’s great intellectual and cultural traditions.

We might recall how monumental that challenge seemed in 1966. Distinguished scholars complained of a “perpetuation of mediocrity” within Catholic universities, including Notre Dame. Tenure-line faculty at Notre Dame taught four courses a semester, occasionally more, and only then conducted research. Faculty salaries were well below national medians. The University’s endowment was not in the Top 60. Measures of student selectivity were less precise in that innocent, pre-*U.S. News and World Report* age, but no outside observer thought Notre Dame’s undergraduates as well prepared, on average, as those at the country’s most elite institutions. Perhaps one or two of the College’s modest graduate programs were nationally competitive.²

¹For a recent study which touches upon Fr. Hesburgh’s efforts, see Mary Frances Berry, *And Justice for All*, (New York, 2009).

²For an overview, John T. McGreevy, “Catholics, Catholicism and the Humanities since World War II,” in *The Humanities and the Dynamics of Inclusion since World War II*, David Hollinger, ed. (Baltimore, 2006), 189-216.
Now the situation is different. Our undergraduate students rank with the very best in the country. Graduate students from Arts and Letters have in the past five years taken positions at Harvard, Oxford, and Chicago. Many, although not all, of our facilities are superb. The endowment is one of the 15 highest in the country, and gifted financial stewards and devoted benefactors have sustained some measure of financial stability even during the current financial crisis, more severe than any since 1945. Our faculty is strong—in some instances extraordinarily strong. In Fr. Jenkins and Tom Burish we have University leaders firmly committed to the liberal arts, at a moment when such commitment is wavering nationally. In Mark Roche we had for 11 years an incandescently good and dedicated dean. (And, now that he has rejoined the faculty, I will enjoy doing his annual performance reviews.)

**Where do we go from here?** How can we make our own the distinctive excellence signified by this room, this College, this place? Four issues seem to me crucial.

*My first aspiration for the College is for a more global or international Arts and Letters.* You should be suspicious of this goal. Look at any university website, scan any university publication, and you will find much rhetoric attached to the talismanic term, global. Type global Harvard, global Columbia, and global USC into a search engine, and you’ll gather dozens of hits. Study abroad programs have begun to multiply at institutions which had previously disdained them. New campuses are under construction in Dubai and Shanghai.

Our desire of Arts and Letters to expand its global reach stems from the same impulses, to be sure, but it has deeper roots. Notre Dame as a Catholic institution is part of the world’s most global, multicultural, and multilingual tradition, and I think we’ve underplayed this dimension of our Catholic identity to our own disadvantage. The Second Vatican Council itself marked a moment in Catholic globalization, with theologians and bishops present from all corners of the globe, a tilt in the Catholic axis away from the North Atlantic and toward the global South. And our achievements in internationalization since the 1960s are real. When many universities dismissed study abroad programs as glorified tourism Notre Dame developed them as important for the undergraduate experience, such that the percentage of our students who study abroad is now the envy of our
competitors and higher than any of the Top 10 private research universities. The institutional legacy of Frs. Hesburgh and Fr. Malloy—most notably the Kellogg Institute, the Center for Social Concerns and the Kroc Institute—helped awaken our campus to Latin America and then the wider world, and those institutes along with Nanovic and Keough now send dozens of students, graduate and undergraduate, abroad each semester and summer.

How do we go forward? One dimension of a more global Arts and Letters is a more multilingual Arts and Letters. This month marked the opening of the new Center for the Study of Languages and Cultures in DeBartolo Hall. We hope the center accelerates the College’s push to become one of the very best places in the country for language acquisition and cross-cultural engagement. At a moment when other universities are cutting back on language instruction Notre Dame is expanding, and we’ve seen recent enrollment increases in almost every language, with Arabic and Chinese enrollments exploding. We will need to track Fulbright awards won (where our record is weak) and retention of students in advanced language courses. We should expect to see higher enrollments in the classical languages so central to the cultivation of Catholic intellectual life. We should expect more summer language work, and Fr. Jenkins and the University’s President’s Circle benefactors have recently dedicated funds to enhance summer language learning opportunities for our students. Last year, to give you a sobering sense of where we are in this regard, Yale sent 150 students for summer language study to China. We sent five. We also need to develop funds for graduate student and faculty language acquisition as many Arts and Letters fields become more self-consciously multilingual and comparative.

Another dimension of a more global Arts and Letters is to take better advantage of our study abroad programs, as locales for undergraduate work, certainly, but also as centers of research and inquiry. I should add my gratitude to our colleague Julia Douthwaite for taking the lead in this effort. Too few Arts and Letters faculty know about or exploit the fact that Notre Dame has superb facilities in London, Jerusalem, Dublin, Freemantle, and Rome. And we possess significant faculty contacts and connections with a range of universities and centers across the globe. We need more summer courses, conferences, and seminars that pull our faculty out of South Bend and into contact with colleagues abroad. I think here of the Keough Institute’s Dublin seminar for faculty and graduate students, which links graduate students and faculty, and also serves as a recruiting tool. Or the recent conferences,
first in Rome and now in South Bend, sponsored by the Devers Program in Dante Studies and the Nanovic Institute, that brought together some of the leading faculty in Arts and Letters with leading faculty at La Sapienza. Or the use made of the Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem by the Kroc Institute and the Department of Theology.

The ideal situation is when undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty combine to make our study abroad programs lively centers of intellectual exchange. Some of this is already happening. Many of you know about the new Kellogg-funded Ford family program in development, focused on sub-Saharan Africa, and more particularly one region of Uganda where Notre Dame has a longstanding presence because of the Congregation of Holy Cross. We hope to use Ford family funds to hire a cluster of scholars in the social sciences—in economics, political science, anthropology, and history—intellectually committed to the study of economic and political development and this region. They will work with our undergraduates, train graduate students, and make this venture a means for collaboration with Uganda Martyrs and other local universities.

Yet another dimension of our internationalization in the next five years will be with faculty appointments. We need to and will invest in the languages and literatures, where we have not made enough senior appointments. We need to strengthen area studies within the social sciences, international trade and development within economics and areas of history, theology, and English that make Notre Dame’s intellectual profile more self-consciously international. We need more strength in theology and across the College for study of the world’s major religious traditions—notably Catholicism and Christianity generally in its global variants but also Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism. Our long-term goal should be to make Arts and Letters an international center of theologically, culturally, and historically sophisticated comparative religious inquiry. And here we can make concrete one of our guiding principles—that faculty from all religious traditions, and none—are at the heart of Notre Dame’s mission.

My second broad aspiration for the College is more collaboration with Notre Dame’s other colleges, most notably Science but Architecture, Business, Law, and Engineering as well. Notre Dame is unusual in separating Arts and Letters from the College of Science. I mentioned in September that I possess no imperial ambitions in regard to biochemistry,
but this arrangement of a College of Science and a College of Arts and Letters has its costs. To pose two rhetorical questions: do our science and engineering students receive enough of a classic liberal arts education? And do our Arts and Letters students graduate without knowing what a genome is or without the basic scientific literacy that equips them to read the front page of the *New York Times?* The good news here is that the new dean of science, Greg Crawford, and the new dean of engineering, Peter Kilpatrick, are also eager to think through cross-college curricular and research issues. We are already discussing a possible B.A. in science and society that would complement a new bachelor’s of science degree in science and society. We anticipate introducing Arts and Letters students to some basic science in courses that blend laboratory case studies with a discussion of the ethical, theological, and historical issues that scientific change entails.

Precisely this intersection—of science and technology on the one hand, and arts and letters on the other—is where Notre Dame can make a difference in the wider world of higher education. The gap between intelligent discussion of science and serious theology and even humanistic inquiry has widened in recent years, with an aggressive group of secular intellectuals positing laboratory knowledge as the sum total of the real and some religious leaders offering weary denunciations of a godless science. (Our science colleagues tell me that they are sometimes asked by colleagues at other universities if they are allowed to even teach evolution at Notre Dame.)

Our opportunity is to model a genuine conversation about religion and science impossible at most universities, a conversation that we believe will interest outside funding agencies and make a significant intellectual contribution. The Reilly Center for Science, Technology, and Values is sponsoring a major conference this spring in Rome on evolution to mark the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin. Our Office of Undergraduate Studies and the Glynn Family Honors Program are sponsoring a range of events on Darwin on campus, too, from plays to an exhibit at the Snite Museum of Art to discussion groups. The newly launched Institute for Advanced Study, which will bring great scholars from around the world to Notre Dame, certainly serves our international goals, but it will also have as one of its foci precisely this question of scientific and humanistic integration.

The needs are equally great beyond the specific topic of science and the humanities. Cognitive science remains a relatively undeveloped area at
Notre Dame, and here we need to better connect psychology, biology, and philosophy. We still haven’t devised an adequate means for cross-college collaboration on the technical and moral dimensions of the environmental crisis. Logic is wonderfully developed at Notre Dame, but even here we might see stronger connections between philosophy and math. Our economics students need more advanced math courses, just as students interested in archeology and anthropology need more biology. We can anticipate future collaboration through the new Center for Research Computing and better statistical analysis through the Survey Research Center, both potentially important for quantitative analysis within sociology, economics, and political science, and for our superb program in quantitative psychology. Industrial design needs more contact with faculty in marketing and engineering.

This is not an exhaustive list, and as in any area the College needs to think about intellectual capacity and niche opportunities. But what we can’t do is allow our organizational structure of separate colleges prevent faculty and students from grappling with some of the most important issues of our day.

**My third goal is to increase the intensity and sophistication of our undergraduate education.** The basic question is this: what kind of alumni do we want in 10 to 20 years? Much progress has been made here in recent years, and I won’t dwell, although I could, on the 115 students who used Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program funding this past year, up from 22 a decade ago. I won’t dwell on the flourishing Glynn Family Honors Program, whose students typically rank in the Top 2 percent of their high school classes with entering SATs above 1500. Or the Learning Beyond the Classroom program.

Instead I’ll focus our attention on two areas that require attention. And I should add that both of these areas actually extend beyond undergraduate education, as they should, since we need to view the efforts of our faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates as a more integrated whole. The first is senior theses. The senior thesis culture in Arts and Letters remains weak, with somewhere between 10 and 15 percent of our students completing a thesis, in contrast to double, triple, and even quadruple that number at peer institutions. We don’t have a good definition of what, precisely, a senior thesis or final project in the arts is, and the variety of terms now drifting through the College—honors thesis, senior essay, honors essay, senior thesis—is symptomatic of our confusion.
Exit data from a variety of universities uniformly conclude that the senior thesis is typically the most formative intellectual experience for those undergraduates who complete one. For a few students it is indispensable preparation for graduate school, and programs without a senior thesis option defeat the College’s ambition to produce more aspiring Ph.D.s. But the purpose of undergraduate education is not preparation for graduate school. Regardless of their career path, a senior thesis for our best students is an opportunity to work one on one with a faculty member or graduate student for a full year on a project that they define, shape, and complete. It’s this sustained independence and autonomy that senior-thesis veterans remember 10 years out and that distinguishes this intellectual experience from the courses that precede it. And once we’ve built a stronger senior thesis culture we can expect ripple effects in other courses and student intellectual life generally, as our best students inevitably gravitate not simply to extracurricular challenges but also to an intellectually demanding culmination to their student career. We are not beginning at zero. Areas as diverse as studio art, the program of liberal studies, political science, and anthropology are strong. But even in these areas we can push harder, and more systematically, to consider issues such as blind grading (which I favor), a common definition, and a common due date. To this end I’ve asked Stuart Greene to put together a committee that will report this spring to the College on developing a senior thesis culture among our students.

A second area needing attention is the arts. Given the state of things a quarter century ago, advancement in the arts is one of the great Arts and Letters success stories of this, the Decade of the Arts at Notre Dame. A partial list of highpoints would include faculty shows at some of the country’s most prestigious galleries, a thriving Shakespeare program, a creative writing program drawing national recognition, student film conferences and competitions, awards for composition and performance by faculty musicians, a revived student opera drawing sell-out crowds, awards for our faculty and students in industrial and graphic design, and the completion of the DeBartolo Performing Arts Center (DPAC). Now we are poised to develop one of the world’s best programs in sacred music.

But it’s also true that many of Notre Dame students, even many of our Arts and Letters students, do not darken the doors of the Snite and DPAC during their time at Notre Dame. This should concern us given that we want our alumni, even if they do not work in the arts, to serve their communities on
local art, symphony, and museum boards. Anna Thompson from DPAC and the performing arts chairs have met to discuss possible strategies for increasing student attendance at shows, getting them more exposure to the arts broadly understood. I also anticipate forming a committee soon to think about mechanisms for pulling together the various arts faculties and groups on campus—not only our own music, our film, television and theater, and our art, art history, and design departments, but also DPAC, the Snite, and the School of Architecture. I’ve no predetermined outcome for this committee, unusually, but I will charge them to think about how to leverage our arts resources not only for undergraduates but for graduate education and research. Should graduate training in the humanities, for example, have more of a visual component or track? Should we develop more opportunities to study the built environment in conjunction with the School of Architecture or architectural history? Should graphic design and the marketing program in Mendoza develop collaborative courses? What resources in terms of equipment, facilities and computing support do we need to better develop arts programs?

My fourth major goal is more fundamental: It is to become the best in the world in signature areas and use those areas to build strength within and across departments. No great university studies everything. And in coming decades we can anticipate a widening gap between the universe of what can be studied and what any particular university does study. The College’s opportunity—and challenge—is to at once carve out distinctive niches within the ecology of the disciplines and departments, and at the same time use those niches to build more general strengths. In this sense every new faculty position, each a potential investment of millions of dollars over the lifetime of a faculty member, needs attention and perhaps more strategic assessment than in previous years. We can afford to be patient. We can also afford, at times, to strike quickly when opportunities to make appointments of extraordinary quality, or appointments that enhance our diversity and our university mission, present themselves. In all instances the quality of the scholar’s research and teaching should be our fundamental guide. Nothing enhances our reputation more than adding to our ranks scholars who enhance our illustrious fellowship record and whose courses challenge and inspire our students.
What we can’t afford to do, what no university of our size can afford to do, is to simply fill slots without any long-term strategic vision. The content of this vision can’t be dictated by the dean’s office. But this won’t prevent me from offering a few ideas. Broadly, we need to continue to play off institutional strengths, so many of which derive from our Catholic mission and our ability to convince benefactors and distinguished faculty outside Notre Dame that particular questions, particular topics, take on a special resonance here. Think of the Center for Children and Families, Dante, religious and intellectual history, and the sociology of religion. Think of medieval studies—an interdisciplinary area of inquiry that continues to provide us many of our strongest graduate placements—and one whose reach makes several departments much stronger than they would otherwise be. Think of our enormous institutional commitment to theology and philosophy, programs whose excellence help underwrite pockets of strength as diverse as Byzantium, sacred music, the history and philosophy of science, and political theory. Think of political science where the recent Rooney gift elevates our ambition to become national leaders in the study of ethnicity and religion in American politics. Think of Latino studies and the possibilities for scholarship and research, given our vibrant Institute for Latino Studies and the rapidly increasing and welcome Latino student presence, the most important demographic change at the University since the admission of women. This list is again suggestive, not exhaustive. But my more general point is to think through areas that not only allow us to advance departments but align with other strengths.

Identifying areas of research strength necessarily draws us into consideration of graduate education. The story of graduate education in Arts and Letters over the past two decades is a success story, too, a long march to build, first, credible programs and then move toward truly excellent ones. The march continues, and I am interested in drawing upon more of our faculty for graduate education, even within departments without freestanding programs, so that the sum total of the faculty contribution to graduate education is greater than the departmental parts. Our graduate students, not just our undergraduates, need opportunities for international research and collaboration with colleagues in other departments and colleges. My immediate priorities for graduate education match those articulated by our new dean and admired colleague Greg Sterling: more competitive stipends and better health insurance. But if we raise our gaze beyond the current moment we can imagine more
stipends, perhaps even more programs. How do we make wise investments? In the short run we make every dollar count by accelerating student progress toward degree, refusing to pass weak students along from year to year, and carefully assessing placement records. In the long run we build graduate programs in the same way we hope to build departments, hoping to create distinct, excellent programs that raise the level of all areas.

At the nexus of research and graduate education is space. A few months ago you heard me discuss our hopes for a new social science building south of the Hesburgh Center, our recognition of lab space needs in psychology, and the intense pressures on Riley. These needs remain, and I can ensure you that we remain committed to planning for the long-term growth of Arts and Letters, not just placing bandages on immediate problems. Here, too, opportunity must work in tandem with accountability. One task for the upcoming year from the vantage point of our office is to look carefully at current space allocations and make sure that even as we plan new facilities we are fully exploiting the lab and office space we now possess.

The stakes in all of this, I will say on this lovely December afternoon, are high. When historians—a phrase that I enjoy beginning sentences with—write the history of the 20th century the history of the American research university will play a significant role. The leading research universities have become global brands, with Harvard, Stanford, and Duke known in the most distant corners of the planet. And European and Asian universities are quickly adopting pieces of the American research university model, with Chinese universities attempting to recruit American scientists to Guandong province and European universities attempting to build more flexible curricular, faculty development, and funding strategies.

Despite or perhaps because of this fierce competition, reading university mission statements, even at very good universities, is a dispiriting exercise. All of the great research universities, it appears, desire excellence. All hope to train future leaders. All understand themselves as committed to both research and teaching. We occasionally traffic in these bland aspirations, too. And Notre Dame faces some unusual obstacles, including our institutional isolation from the Ivy League, the Big 10, and even other leading Catholic universities. When the former president of University of Chicago Don Randall visited Notre Dame recently as part of the Strategic Academic Planning Committee process, everyone in the room winced when he offhandedly
mentioned that this was his first visit to Notre Dame. We must also be wary of the risk faced by all religious institutions, including religious universities, of evincing a false moral superiority, of conveying an unattractive smugness. But Notre Dame has something distinctive. In Arts and Letters especially we are heir to one of the world’s core cultural and intellectual traditions, something that enables us to maintain an intellectual vision even when buffeted by the winds of academic fashion or the desires of the market. We possess a rich campus based residential and worship life, creating an almost unrivaled sense of loyalty among our students and alumni, an identification evident in everything from chants of “We are ND” at sporting events to volunteer service after graduation. We inherit a vision that attempts to link faith and ideas in a university world that often presumes their separation but in a larger intellectual environment yearning for reflective discussion on exactly these subjects. It’s an open question whether a modern research university can at once be great and seriously religious. It is an experiment. Like all true experiments it might fail. But the past 40 years should give us reason to hope. We are told that Fr. Hesburgh offered a faculty position to one of the most prominent theologians at the Second Vatican Council when he convened the conference I mentioned at the beginning of my presentation, a young Bavarian named Joseph Ratzinger. Ratzinger is now Pope Benedict XVI. The subject of his last encyclical, it turns out, is hope. Here he asks us to allow hope to sustain us as we move toward great goals. Here he urges us to sustain the sort of “hope that cannot be destroyed even by small-scale failures.” And here he pleads with all men and women of good will to view collaborative projects as “hope in action.” The coming years may include a few small-scale failures. But they will also include some “hope in action.” And I am hopeful that together we’ll be able to accomplish great things for our students, our College, and our University. I look forward to working with all of you and thanks for your patient listening this afternoon.