



# A COMMITMENT TO PERSONALIZED EDUCATION:

President Don DeRosa's Leadership and Whole-Student Learning at Pacific

*This article is the first in a series commemorating the service of University of the Pacific's transformative President Don DeRosa, who will retire at the end of the current academic year. The first part looks at how Dr. DeRosa's educational philosophy evolved and how it has been implemented at Pacific.*

**BY KATE WASHINGTON**

Spend much time at University of the Pacific, or with President Don DeRosa, and you will become familiar with the phrase “whole-student learning.” This philosophy highlights, DeRosa says, “the importance of a personalized education that takes into account, as we do at Pacific, the whole person.”

DeRosa says the people who are drawn to Pacific value the student in a way he believes is uncommon.

“There’s something very special about Pacific, about the faculty and their commitment to students and to whole-student development,” he says during an interview on a sunny day in San Francisco. “Every university I know is trying to find a way to highlight the phrase ‘student-centered’ in their mission statements. But if it’s not part of their culture, the words may be there, but you don’t find it put into practice.”

At Pacific, however, that commitment is ingrained in the university’s culture. Most recently, it has found expression with the president’s initiative in social and emotional intelligence, inspired by the work of Daniel Goleman — a Stockton native whose parents taught at Pacific.

That broad commitment to the whole student, which has strengthened considerably during DeRosa’s presidency, sprang from his own educational experience, which fostered an intuitive understanding of student-centered education long before admissions brochures featured the term. DeRosa, the first in his family to attend college, first experienced a college campus in 1959, when he went to American International College in Springfield, Mass.

“What had a significant influence on me throughout my life were mentors — individuals who took an interest in me, or pointed out something to me that led me to aspire to do even more.”

Mentorships don’t have to be formal, he points out: “Sometimes mentors aren’t even conscious they are mentoring,” he muses. “I think faculty members, in particular, don’t fully realize the influence they have on people.”

DeRosa gives the example of one of his professors, Richard Sprinthall, whose mentorship began with a single note scribbled in the margins of a college assignment. “When I was a sophomore, my psychology professor wrote a note on an essay exam inviting me to come and visit with him,” he says, smiling at the recollection. “I did, and he encouraged me to consider psychology as a major.”

That simple note would alter the course of DeRosa’s career. He became Sprinthall’s teaching assistant and went on to graduate school at Kent State University and teaching at Bowling Green State University before entering administration. DeRosa spoke at Sprinthall’s retirement dinner last year — an event he recalls warmly.

Such gestures — so crucial to fostering mentorship, itself a key to Pacific’s educational model — are the kind of extra effort that busy faculty might omit, but not at Pacific. “So often students will tell me that a faculty member invites them to drop by his or her office,” DeRosa says. “You know, this is not typical; many faculty at other institutions can be very rigid about when they will meet with students. One of the things that attract our faculty to Pacific is that we value this commitment to personalized education.”

DeRosa points out that whole-student learning takes place both inside and outside the classroom, and is a particular benefit for Pacific’s large group of first-generation students. “At Pacific, those students don’t get lost,” DeRosa says with obvious pride. “They don’t get lost because of outstanding student life staff and faculty that are committed to our mission. A young person who may not have had the benefit of a mentor will find someone to guide them at Pacific.”

DeRosa is equally passionate about leadership development, a key component of Pacific’s mission. An avid reader of American history, DeRosa mentions that he has been inspired by Doris Kearns Goodwin’s acclaimed “Team of Rivals,” which explores how Abraham Lincoln chose for his Cabinet individuals with viewpoints that differed from his and expertise that exceeded his own.

“The Board at Pacific has complimented me on the fact I have hired strong people,” says DeRosa, who hesitates, reluctant to reveal this praise. “I think that in understanding what one is good at, you also have to understand what you’re not so good at, and be willing to surround yourself with people who excel at those things.”

DeRosa cites a work by Steven Sample, President of the University of Southern California, called “The Contrarian’s Guide to Leadership.” “He talks about turning leadership upside down,” says DeRosa. “In a sense, he’s working for the people who report to him, and always looking to see how he can make them more effective.”

DeRosa’s fresh approach to leadership goes beyond simply assembling a talented team, however: “As a leader, you’re not seeing yourself as the center of everything and the center of intelligence on everything.” Then, leaning forward, he brings his hands together, as if unconsciously enacting the gesture he describes. “You’re seeking to find all these talents and help to orchestrate something that’s greater than the sum of individual parts.”

That leadership model sounds quite a bit like mentorship — the key to DeRosa’s views on teaching and learning. Looking at individuals, finding their talents, and helping them to strive to accomplish greater things: this approach, so characteristic of Pacific and DeRosa’s presidency, is a model not just for education but for life.