I Interview

Dr Patrick Prendergast

Provost, Trinity College

I want to turn every single Trinity student into an entrepreneur

Thomas Molloy meets the enterprising provost to talk about his plans for a new business school

It is a strange time to visit Trinity College Dublin. Its famous "great doors" have been restored after they were rammed by a mysterious car driver.

The return of the ancient oak panels leads to the characteristic sense of timelessness at Ireland's oldest university, but change is in the air.

Change isn't always popular, especially in a place with such long-standing traditions.

On the Internet, with warriors ralling against a decision to rename - or rebuild - the 400-year-old institution as Trinity College, the University of Dublin, a move presumably prompted by some Americans or Chinese teenagers might mistake it for a secondary school.

As I arrive on campus, Front Square bustles with tourists taking up the past, but yards away the university's head, or provost, sits contemplating the future and his desire to attract a whole new class of visitors to the campus.

Patrick Prendergast meets me in the study of the beautiful Georgian house overlooking College Green that is surely the biggest perk of his job. He's here to evangelise about plans to build a new business school on the city centre campus.

The setting is tranquil and tradition at rector Westwood-born Prendergast is bursting with radical ideas.

He wants to turn every Trinity student into an entrepreneur.

Construction of the €70m business school has not begun yet but the provost believes its influence will extend far beyond the business faculty to change the way all Trinity students think.

The plan is for every student, in every discipline, from theology to engineering, to take classes on how to turn ideas into companies and have access to help if they want to set up a business. While every student can become involved, Prendergast believes that the new school will be especially appealing to engineers, business students, scientists and the like.

Trinity's existing business school is hidden away in one of the most picturesque parts of the college that butts on to Pearse Street. Prendergast wants to knock down the old Luce sporting hall and build a five-storey building that will also incorporate several Georgian buildings on Pearse Street next to the Naughton Institute. The number of lectures will double from around 50 to 60 and new courses and streams such as an international business will be developed.

"I don't want a business school that is sitting in the department of arts and humanities," says Prendergast, who is an engineer himself. "The business school will be located near the scientists and engineers. Geography is important. I want people to see each other. Meet each other."

Until now, Trinity has been overshadowed - including by the famous School of Business - but Prendergast carefully hopes his new courses will become the global standard for Irish business leaders who want further training and for business leaders living abroad. He sees Trinity as following in the footsteps of Stanford University which has developed a global brand in business and commerce.
impact on society even if it is not profit making," says Prendergast. While the
prevailing expert engineers and scientists to benefit most from the plan, he believes
even those in unrelated disciplines such as theology will benefit.

Urban and down-to-earth, Prendergast is particularly interested in business.
"I was, and still am, very interested in commercial innovation," he says, not
without reason.

First as an engineering student and later as a lecturer, Prendergast tried to
patent several devices during the 1980s to help people with hearing problems
and other medical difficulties. The young Prendergast developed prototypes,
worked with surgeons and approached venture capitalists and orthopaedic com-
panies in a bid to take the ideas further.

"It would have been better to develop the prototype ourselves. Get some
angel funding. But we didn’t know the word angel at the time," he says.
Prendergast’s zeal may come from growing up in an entrepreneurial En-
terprise family.

My father ran his own business. He had a hardware business. He worked
day and night, he remembers. "There were lots of machinists around. Running a
transport business in the 1970s and 1980s involved a lot of fixing," the profes-
sor of engineering remembers. "It was some time before I realised you could
make a living working any other way." It was this experience that led him
towards engineering combined with the belief that engineering, more than sci-
ence or arts and the humanities is about changing the world.

"Scientists explore what has been. Engineers explore what has never been," he
says in his gentle Westford accent. Others may disagree, but this engineer
sees a need to create a business school that is fully worthy of Trinity’s his-
torical mission and world reputation.