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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 lends 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, wifi warriors rail against a decision to rename – or rebrand – the 400-year-old institution as Trinity College, the University of Dublin, a move presumably prompted by fears American or Chinese teenagers might mistake it for a secondary school.

As I arrive on campus, Front Square bustles with tourists soaking 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 traditional but Wexford-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, health-care students, scientists and the like.

Trinity's existing business school is hidden away in one of the most obscure parts of the college that butts on to Pearse Street. Prendergast wants to knock down the old Luce sports 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 lecturers will double from around 20 to 40 and new courses and strands 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 Trinity 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 Smurfit School of Business – but Prendergast naturally hopes his new courses will become the gold standard for Irish business leaders who want further training and for business leaders living abroad. He sees Trinity as following in the lead of Stanford University which has developed a global lead in business and commerce.

Ambitious

"I think Stanford has kept their traditions very dear but yet they have a curriculum that is about entrepreneurship," he says. "We are also located in a technology hub."

The new school's involvement in all aspects of college life will be important.

"The key thing that a university does is deliver a curriculum," he muses. "Perhaps many universities have not given enough focus to the curriculum and just keep teaching the same thing. Trinity wants to keep ahead of change. It's an ambitious project; we have 11,000 undergraduates and 6,000 graduates."

The charge for a new school is being aided by 20 unnamed donors and Sean Melly of Powerscourt Capital, who is working with other prominent Trinity alumni to organise funding. While old boys and girls will contribute funds, most of the cash will have to come from Trinity's own resources.

"Our emphasis here is on innovation and entrepreneurship. We are not planning just to replicate what goes on in the Smurfit Business School or UCD," Prendergast says. "We're in the city centre where so much of the foreign direct investment is happening."

At the heart of Prendergast's plans is the radical idea that every undergraduate from the history of art department to the engineering faculty should take classes in the new business school. These classes won't be about business plans and the like, they will focus on making sure students think entrepreneurially. "I think it is more important that they feel the culture," he says.

"All students will want to make an

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impact on society even if it is not profit making," says Prendergast. While the provost expects engineers and scientists to benefit most from the plan, he believes even those in unlikely disciplines such as theology will benefit.

Urbane and down-to-earth, Prendergast is genuinely 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 orthopedic companies in a bid to take the ideas further.

"In retrospect, 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 Ennis-corthy family.

"My father ran his own business. He had a haulage business. He worked day and night," he remembers. "There were a lot of machines around. Running a transport business in the 1970s and 1980s involved a lot of fixing," the professor 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 science or arts and the humanities is about changing the world.

"Scientists explore what has been. Engineers create what has never been," he says in his gentle Wexford accent.

Others may disagree, but this engineer seems set to create a business school that is finally worthy of Trinity's historical mission and world reputation.



Dr Patrick
Prendergast
at Trinity
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