



Origins of the Presidio Graduate School Founding Educational Philosophy

Dwight Collins PhD, Founding Faculty, Dean Emeritus (5/8/2024)

Presidio Graduate School was founded to provide a revolutionary new education for values-driven and visionary leaders. The institution was built based on three pillars of our founding educational philosophy:

- Learner's engaged participation through Experiential Learning and Pragmatic Inquiry® as the process of disciplined reflection and action based on experience.
- Systems thinking and practice to design creative solutions that take into account the interrelationships among human, organizational and ecological systems.
- Integration and communication of knowledge culminating in an integrative capstone course where students demonstrate their mastery of the program's core competencies and have the opportunity to uncover, define, articulate and test their calling – the work they sense they are called to do

This statement was created by Ron Nahser, PhD, shortly after he arrived at the school to be Provost in the summer of 2004 (the school opened its doors in fall 2003). Its themes elegantly reflect the objectives of the school's visionary cofounder, Richard Gray, and cofounding President, Steven Swig. This is not surprising given that both Gray and Nahser had long careers in advertising followed by graduate education in religion, theology, and philosophy, and Swig had experienced the fundamental flaws in the practice of M&A law in his career; they viewed the world through very similar lenses.

While not stated in precise terms, the essence of the three pillars is captured on the current Presidio website under [Academics](#) under the headings of "Our Approach," "Experiential Learning," and "Systems Thinking." Real world experience combined with classroom learning was central to Gray's vision¹. This vision was more formally put into practice as a central feature of the school's brand when the school's Experiential Learning Program was cofounded and structured in 2006 by Dwight Collins. The Program, in which all MBA students work in three to four companies as part of their Presidio learning experience, continues today.

The first two appendices below demonstrate Cofounder Gray's emphasis on *calling* as a critical underlying theme and practice of the school. In Appendix 3, excerpted from Nahser's *Journeys to Oxford* lecture series, the three pillars and founding curriculum are discussed in more detail². This series grew out of Nahser's late-in-life PhD dissertation at DePaul University on American Pragmatism, (now in its second edition³), much of which was written at Oxford's Department of Educational Studies and Centre for the Study of Values in Education and Business.

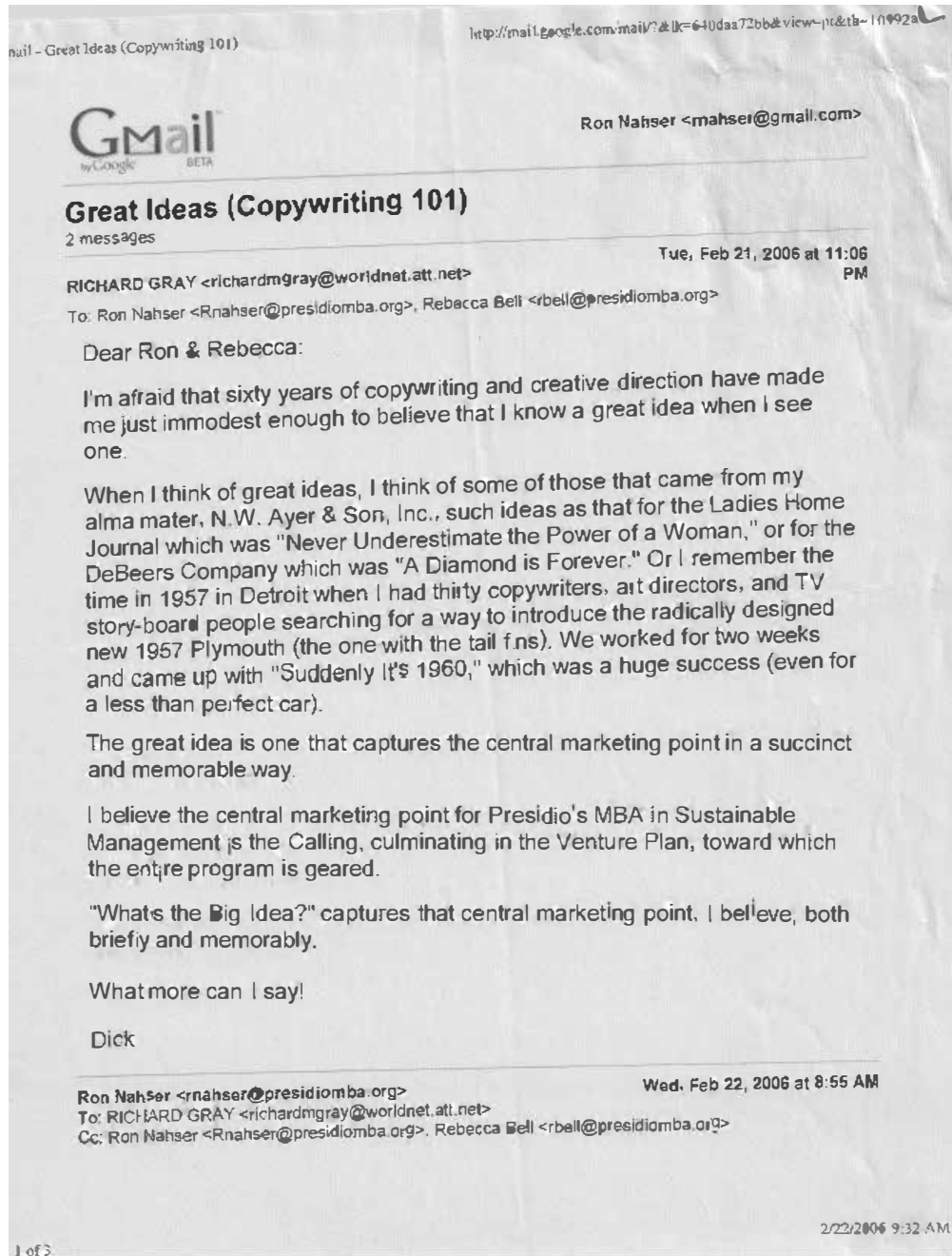
¹ "Only disciplined reflection on experience leads to learning that lasts." Richard Gray

² Nahser, Ron. (2008). *Journeys to Oxford: 9 Pragmatic Inquiries into the Practice of Values in Business and Education*. New York, Global Scholarly Publication. See also Appendix 3.

³ Nahser, F. Byron (Ron), (2012, 2nd edition), *Learning to Read the Signs: Reclaiming Pragmatism for the Practice of Sustainable Management*. London and New York; Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Appendix 1: Gray – Nahser 2006 Email Exchange re Calling

A 2006 email exchange between Gray and Nahser, just prior to Nahser's Presidio presentation at Oxford that summer, demonstrates in particular Co-founder Gray's emphasis on *calling* as a critical underlying theme driving the founding of the school, referring to it as a "central marketing point" of the school.



Appendix 1 (Cont.)

mail - Great Ideas (Copywriting 101)

<http://mail.google.com/mail/?ik=640daa72bb&view=pt&th=10992a...>

Dear Dick,

Great insight and beautifully expressed, especially your insight into the core promise of the program. And I like your Ayer lines.

My only wake-up thought is still to focus on the mindset of the students who are thinking about their lives and where they want to go.

We do make the unique fundamental promise that they will come out with, if not an idea and direction, certainly the way to continue to *think* about ideas and directions.

As we know, many students haven't given much thought to a specific project - and part of the promise of the program is that, even if they have, we will turn them around dozens of times during the program, looking at the ideas from multiple perspectives.

We have heard many prospective students profess concern that they don't *have* an idea and does that mean they shouldn't enter the program until they do.

Of course we reassure them that that is the purpose of the program.

We are also being more careful not to promise that their Venture Plan will be their life's work but at the very least the best learning experience in how to pursue their calling.

In terms of expressing this, Dick, you have set the bar high with your line. And if another idea can't be seen as clearly superior, then the incumbent wins. (That stance, as we know from our years in the business, is to overcome the usual client whining - "I just don't think it 'works'".)

So, my only contribution is:

"What's driving you?"*

This is based on the idea of "moral impulse" which lies at the heart of the human experience along with marketing, of course.

Then the copy gets into the rest of the ideas and concerns.

Let's talk at 9:30 and decide.

Ron

*E.g.

"Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life" • Mary Oliver

of 3

2/22/2006 9:32 AM

Appendix 2: Gray Review of Nahser 2006 *Journeys to Oxford (JTO)*

A review of Nahser's *Journeys to Oxford (JTO)* by Gray, a summary of which appears on the back dust jacket of the book, provides useful background on the development of the pragmatic inquiry practice, the role of "calling" in defining the school's mission, and the reference to business as a noble profession.



REVIEW

JOURNEYS TO OXFORD – 9 Pragmatic Inquiries into the Practice of Values in Business and Education

Richard M. Gray, Co-Founder, Presidio School of Management

In this "Pragmatic Journey Sketchbook", Ron Nahser quotes Alfred North Whitehead's address to the Harvard Business School as follows:

"The behavior of the community is largely dominated by the business mind. A great society is one in which its men [and women] of business think greatly of their functions."

It is clear from the nine chapters that follow that Dr. Nahser has thought not only deeply but greatly of the function of business in society.

It can even be said he has engaged, both personally and professionally, in the search for a religious grounding for business, a search to which these lectures make a valuable contribution.

Building on the work of Peirce, Royce, James, Dewey, and others, he has developed and implemented a method of pragmatic inquiry for business which digs beneath the quarterly demands of the corporate world to the underlying values which are found in every company's story. And, even further, he has taken this method of inquiry from the world of business to the world of business education.

Until Ron was appointed Provost at the Presidio School of Management in 2004 (known until then as Presidio World College) I had hesitated to use the word "calling" in defining the School's mission. While I was well acquainted with the concept, having felt called after 16 years in the business world to enter a graduate school in theology, I was concerned that some faculty and prospective students would think that "calling" was too religious a term.

Then Ron strode in boldly and, without hesitation, laid out the task of helping students discover their own distinctive callings as the principal focus of the School's two-year, sixteen-course M.B.A. program in Sustainable

Appendix 2 (Cont.)

Management. This is certainly unique in business education and affords a strong platform, I believe, for delivering a values-driven M.B.A. program, just as his *Pathfinder* method of Pragmatic Inquiry® provides a platform for any values-driven business.

Indeed, if pragmatism in business can be defined as Peirce and Nahser define it, not as "what works," but rather the pursuit of "what is true," it will lead to a sea-change in the way business is practiced.

For truth in this instance will be discovered in the movement between ideas or principles (deduction) and facts or reality (induction) through constant testing, the result of which will be abduction. And abduction will deliver the truth which is told not once but is always in the making.

This dynamic is a healthy one not only for business but for the society it serves. If Ron in his method of inquiry keeps asking the question, "What's the story?" it's because he knows that the truth will be found in the story. What a compelling concept! There is no question in my mind that Ron would have made a very successful rabbi!

Jerome Bruner of Harvard University once defined creativity as the capacity to make unexpected connections. And I cannot think of a more unexpected connection than the one that Ron implies in his contention that one's purpose in life is found not in reflection but in response to a call. This is not unlike the thesis of Rollo May's book, *Freedom and Destiny*, that living out one's destiny is the only path to freedom. Similarly creative is Ron's connection between business and the Benedictines. Indeed if business, like the monastic order, can somehow link knowledge, labor, and moral energy, it will serve this planet as well as any sector of society can.

Being a feeling extrovert, according to the Myers-Briggs personality inventory, I am in complete sympathy with Ron's premise (based on Scheler's work) that feeling is the foundation of ethical action, and that all values derive from the lived experience of active people. In Jerome Bruner's book, *Essays for the Left Hand*, he quotes a psychologist at a conference in Wood's Hole, Massachusetts, who asks, "How do I know what I think until I say what I feel." If this is true, surely it supports Ron's proposition that feelings lie at the heart of values.

In their scope and breadth, the nine lectures herein offer a tantalizing introduction to the method of pragmatic inquiry pioneered by Ron in his

Appendix 2 (Cont.)

Pathfinder © *Notebook*, designed to illuminate the values and vision that drive personal and organizational performance. Following the steps outlined in that process (Begin. Explore. Interpret. Decide, Act) can help create a truly integrated individual or company of character.

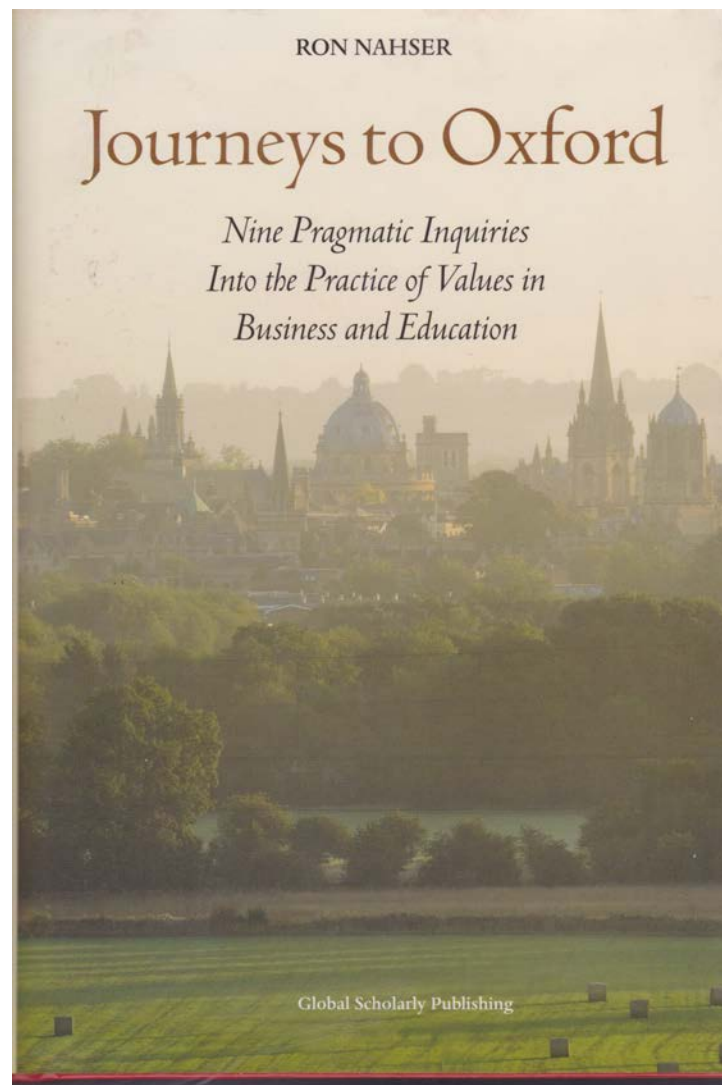
I commend Ron's invitation to you, the reader, to pursue the truth in your own community of inquirers so that, together, you may come to "read the signs" which give meaning and purpose to what you do in the world.

Richard M. Gray, Ph.D.
Greenbrae, California

Appendix 3: The 3 Founding Pillars Supported by Our Values Philosophy

This appendix, excerpted from Nahser's *Journeys to Oxford*, presents and discusses the three founding pillars of Presidio's educational philosophy in detail. It also describes "Competences Expected of Presidio MBA Graduates" that follow from the three pillars. The "Founding Curriculum," designed to implement the 3 founding pillars, was structured in accordance with four strands – People, Numbers, Sustainability, and Markets. The pillars and strands provide the educational context for the students' practice "to uncover, define, articulate and test their calling – the work they sense they are called to do."

Experiential Learning projects were built into four of the 16 MBA courses. While the curriculum was redesigned by the faculty in 2009 around a set of Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs), care was taken to ensure that this PLO set continued to reflect the founding pillars.



1st MBA in Sustainable Management in US



PRESIDIO
SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

2-Yr Track	People	Numbers	Sustainability	Markets
Semester 1	Effective Management, Communication & Action	Managerial Accounting	Principles of Sustainable Management	Managerial Economics
Semester 2	Evolutionary Leadership, Collaboration & Systems Thinking	Operations & Production	Business, Government & Civil Society	Ecological Economics & Macroeconomics
Semester 3	Strategic Management	Managerial Finance	Sustainable Products & Services	Managerial Marketing
Semester 4	Culture: Values & Ethics	Economics, Capital Markets & the Law	Implementation of Sustainable Business Practices	Integrative Capstone Venture Plan

Figure 9.3: Presidio School of Management Curriculum

Presented at 8th International Conference on
Social Values in Education and Business,
University of Oxford,
Department of Educational Studies.,
July, 2006

Appendix

Presidio World College Educational Philosophy – Our Values

Our educational philosophy, developed to enable students to engage in the world sustainably as managers, leaders, entrepreneurs and professionals in business, nonprofit and government organizations, is based on three tenets.

1. Learning from Interactive Experience and Reflection The first tenet is that learning is an *interactive experience* whose quality depends in large measure on the learner's engaged participation – intellectually, physically, intuitively and ethically. Presidio School of Management believes that goal-directed action, mutually agreed upon, is more motivating and more potent than random or scattered action. The same is true of self-directed action, as opposed to authority-directed action.

We place primary emphasis on Project Oriented Learning referred to by Alfred North Whitehead as “first-hand knowledge,” who noted that: “The second-handedness of the learned world is the secret of its mediocrity.”

It follows, then, that a positive, transformative education cannot be “delivered” to the student. It is, instead, an experience of co-creation by student and mentors, a stream of encounters and interactions and feedback, some carefully designed, some true adventures. John Dewey expressed this focus: “The aim of education is not to put theory into practice, but to make practice understandable.”

Therefore, the School believes that *pragmatic inquiry* and learning – the process of disciplined reflection and action based on experience – is far more effective and lasting than learning from experience alone

(inductive reasoning) or reflection in the abstract (deductive reasoning). It is this continuous, testing movement between experience and assumptions (called “abductive reasoning”), which leads to genuine understanding, education and authentic action.

2. Systems Thinking and Practice The second tenet – *systems thinking and practice* – involves looking at issues or problems as a whole and designing solutions and practices that take into account the interrelationships among human, organizational and ecological systems. The systems perspective is often omitted from and even discouraged by the highly specialized, discipline-centered model of higher education we have known for the past 150 years. While this specialization model has given the Western world a high state of technological advancement, its narrow focus has operated on the principle of separation (This was the concern of the Fri-bourg Union for a more systemic/organic view of business and society. Chap. 1). The approach has been to separate the goal to be reached and then to focus on reaching that goal – without respect to other goals or impacts – whether the challenge was growing uniform apples or putting a person on the moon. The result of this approach is that yesterday’s solutions have a way of becoming today’s problems. In the words of the 1999 State of the World Report, education has increasingly taught “disconnection.” But the earth is telling us today that it operates (in both the personal, social and natural spheres) on the principle of integration and wholeness. Each part of each system is related to every other part, and all systems are related, in turn, to one another. So the need is not so much for specialists who can isolate issues as it is for “connectionalists” who can think creatively about the way those things, numbers and people, relate to one another. Jerome Bruner of Harvard has defined creativity as “the capacity to make un-

expected connections.” The ability to recognize and articulate those connections – human and material – in tangible, narrative language as commitments and promises in the world, leads to action. These are the principal capacities for which future leaders must be prepared. Which leads to the 3rd tenet.

3. Integration and Communication of Knowledge The two tenets described above, in combination, lead to the third tenet, which is the *integration and communication of knowledge*. Since we learn from active participation and seeing interconnections, the Presidio curriculum culminates in the Integrative Capstone course. In this course students develop a Venture Plan – also known as an “AdVen-ture” Plan – that captures the narrative quality of their work. This plan draws on all their studies, engages the marketplace through the creation of a business plan and demonstrates their mastery of the Program’s Core Competencies.

For Presidio students, creating and developing their Venture Plan also provides the opportunity to uncover, define, articulate and test their calling – the work they sense they are called to do – engaging others and leading toward their goals, and the School’s goal, of furthering sustainability in the world.

Competencies Expected of Presidio MBA Graduates

Communication Skills The ability to effectively communicate through oral and written mediums as demonstrated by coursework, online engagement, papers, and presentations.

Sustainability The ability to apply the principles of whole systems thinking to the leadership decisions of a public, private or non-profit

organization, as demonstrated through coursework and the development of an effective implementation plan of a sustainable management taxonomy.

Numbers Demonstrated understanding and mastery of the practical skills needed to run an organization, such as accounting, finance, operations, statistical analysis, budgeting and strategic planning, as demonstrated through coursework, papers, cases, exams, and the successful development of a sustainable venture plan. Graduates are expected to have confidence in their ability to understand the financial realm of business and the wisdom to know how to get the information they need to lead effectively and sustainably.

Markets The capacity and commitment to develop and communicate a vision for a successful organization that values not only financial profit, but also human development and ecological sustainability. Demonstrated understanding of markets, economic paradigms, the development of products and services, selling one's ideas, and communication within a market environment will be assessed through successful completion of coursework, papers, exams, case analysis, and the successful development of a sustainable venture plan.

People The ability to work and learn collaboratively and effectively toward a common goal as demonstrated by the successful completion of group projects and measured by faculty and peer evaluation. Graduates will know how to give and receive feedback, with personal development in the areas of authenticity, networking, community engagement/support, and mentorship of others as evaluated by their peers and faculty in coursework and final written reflections.

Leadership The wisdom and courage to function as an effective change agent toward sustainability and renewal in whatever organization or field one works or plans to enter. This capacity will be assessed in the final semester of the program, through successful completion of the venture plan course.

Sustainable Management – Definitions

Sustainable Management is the practice of cultivating, linking and renewing our resources – human, social, natural, manufactured, financial – to serve the needs of present and future generations. It guides every successful community's commercial, cultural and civic strategies.

“**Marketing** serves as the link between society's needs and its patterns of institutional response. It must be put at the heart of strategy.”*

Ron Nahser, PhD
Provost,
Presidio School of Management
With the Presidio faculty, staff, and students.

For more information about Presidio School of Management, visit:
www.presidio.edu

*Inspired by Philip Kotler, Kellogg School of Management: