

Oral History Interview of Dr. Ángel Cabrera  
June 19, 2019  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, Virginia  
Interviewer Robert Vay

00:07

Robert Vay:

Well thank you Dr. Cabrera for joining us this afternoon.

Dr. Cabrera:

Thank you so much for having me. It's a pleasure.

Robert Vay:

So how did you come to apply for the position of President of George Mason University?

Dr. Cabrera:

Well, I, we, we lived at the time in Arizona and um, I was president of, uh, of Thunderbird and our kids at the time were hitting high school age and we thought, you know, this might be the right timing to consider a move, so that we gave the kids some stability during high school. So I said, you know, we probably should be open if the, if the right opportunity came up. And I, I considered, um, going into business, actually. And we, we had a very interesting opportunity in Miami and we even considered it and traveled to Miami and, and, and we were really thinking seriously about it when quite literally the telephone rang, and we're having dinner with friends and we were telling them about this Miami job. And... and the, the friends were saying, well, do you know, you don't sound all that excited about going to Miami. You seem like you're trying to convince yourself.

And that's when I got the email that says, hey, George Mason University is looking for a president. So I saw the email on my iPhone going to the, to the restroom. And on the way back, I told them, I got this email from George Mason University. My friends look at me and say: All of a sudden you look happy! Don't go to Miami". And so actually we declined the job in Miami before knowing whether this was going to work out. But, but, uh, I was so intrigued by it and yeah, it was the head hunter who called me and, and I had a couple of conversations with the board and decided to, to interview formally and, um, finally here I am.

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Robert Vay:

So what was the interview process like?

Dr. Cabrera:

Well, my first point of contact was with the two board members who lead the search committee, um, Lovey Hamill and Carol Kirby and they said, hey, we're very intrigued by you. We're going to be in Texas, um, can you meet? And so, I told Beth, I said I had to go to Texas. She says, well, I have all these complications with the kids. I said, I'm sorry I have to go to Texas. I need to. So we met at the airport, it's top secret, uh, interview in a, in a, in a hotel room. And there was real chemistry. I loved how they spoke about the university and the passion they showed about the university. I returned home, and I said "Beth this might be the real thing. I really love what I'm, what I'm hearing". So that was the beginning. Then there's a formal process where I, I came to Alexandria, forgot the name of the hotel on King Street where the search committee had gathered. And um, so it's a big, big search committee with representatives, faculty members and board members, students and members of the community and a whole bunch of questions. But I remember it not as, as a stressful, uh, conversation. I remember it as a quite a pleasant conversation with that group and really walking out of the room quite inspired by what I could read in the, in the questions and in the reactions of, of the members of that committee.

[03:26](#)

Robert Vay:

And, um, so why do you think you were selected or, just even in your own... what do you think impressed them?

Dr. Cabrera:

I...So that's a great question. I don't know. Uh, I don't know. I mean, I obviously, I, um, I think there were questions about, I remember there was a lot of interest in, in understanding my, my views about the future of higher education, how technology was transforming, um, higher education, what I thought about what was going on in various universities. So, so I think we engage in conversations that were not just so much practical about what would you do if x and more so about, uh, vision related, if you will. So, um, I'm guessing that there was something in, in my views of higher ed that resonated with them. Um, but I, I really don't know. And, and these search processes are complicated. So, uh, I'm sure there were like plenty of people with, with great qualifications, perhaps it perhaps even superior qualifications. Uh, but there's got to be a chemistry and there's got to be a moment and a sense that, that this is the person that this organization needs in this particular moment. And, um, Hey, I'm glad they reached the conclusion they did because this has been an incredible experience.

[04:52](#)

Robert Vay:

Yeah. And it seemed, you know, on the outside over here, it seemed as if it took forever.

Dr. Cabrera:

Is that right?

Robert Vay:

Yeah, because we, we remembered the last time around, some of us who had been here forever remember Dr. Merten's search process and it was different. We, we kind of had a, we knew it was going

along and along because we knew we had four candidates. We got to meet the candidates, you know, but we were smaller then, you know, we weren't, it wasn't that, that job wasn't what it is today or what it was seven years ago. So the necessity for, you know, this is really a big time job now. Um, you know, during Dr. Merten's tenure, you know, our status just went so much higher.

Dr. Cabrera:

Right. It did.

Robert Vay:

And, and waiting for you, we had no idea what was going on.

Dr. Cabrera:

Right.

Robert Vay:

And like I said, it seemed like inside...

Dr. Cabrera:

Uh, you know, I know when you're inside, there's a sense of, I mean, it's easy to be impatient or have a sense of urgency. You want to know.... there's so much uncertainty, but from the outside, this was actually quite a fast process in the overall scheme of things. I think they, they started off the process in the summer and I was announced in December. Yeah. I mean there are some of these processes that take the better part of a, of an academic year. So it wasn't that bad. Right.

[06:16](#)

Robert Vay:

And I was there a hotel. Right.

Dr. Cabrera:

Yeah, of course. You know better than.... you can answer that question better than I can. Yeah. Cause you were in the deliberations too.

[06:26](#)

Robert Vay:

So what'd you know about Mason before you applied? Before you actually decided to read up on us? What, what did you know?

Dr. Cabrera:

Sure. A few years ago, I was asked by President Clinton to, uh, to co-chair the, um, the Clinton Global Initiative annual meeting in New York. And there was a professor who was another co-chair, Phil Auerswald, who teaches in the Schar school. And so one of my first, the first people that I knew, uh, was him. And I was quite impressed by, by his background and, and the impact that he was having in the, in the bigger scenes. And so I was very intrigued by that. I, I think I heard Alan Martin speak in a couple of higher education events. So I have also that, that perspective. And then, uh, of course as, um, I heard about the opportunity. All of a sudden, all these connections started popping up in my life, and professors and colleagues that I had had who either were here or had been here. And so you start accumulating information and it was really fascinating.

But what was very interesting is that a few years ago, before we even responded to the call and I agreed to meet with, uh, with a search committee, uh, and we started thinking, Hey, what will we do after, after Arizona, uh, Beth, my wife, uh, we were on, uh, one of our beach vacations in Spain and she was going for a long walk and came back from one of her long walks and says, you know, I've decided that whenever we're ready to move from Arizona, northern Virginia would be the place for us when I'm like, okay, how did you reach that conclusion? We've never lived there. We really don't know many people there. I go to DC for business, but we don't. And she's, she had a whole theory of why that was the perfect place for the Cabrera's. And then we kind of forgot about that conversation cause it's like, well, what are the chances that I will find a job there? And sure enough, here we are. She saw some things... she saw something in the future.

[08:30](#)

Robert Vay:

So, yeah. So what, what was most striking about Mason or did you already mention it?

Dr. Cabrera:

No, I mean, what, what I really pretty immediately pops up every time you talk to anyone who knows Mason, uh, well there are a couple of ideas that .. they may come up in different words and in different ways. But it's always those two ideas. One is this, um, notion of diversity and inclusion. Anybody who sets foot on this campus for the first time, it pops up, you see it. But even people who know this place well, they recognize it as a strength. They're proud of it. They see it as one of your very unique aspect of this university. So that's one of the things that I, that I knew. The other one is this notion of innovation. Young university that was just a satellite of UVA until the 70s, and then all the sudden explodes into this incredible institution, a university that had to find its way, um, to really, uh, go through obstacles that were planted along the way to get to where it is. And that forced this university to always find an innovative pathway to get there, that it had to do things differently almost by necessity. So, uh, again, those two ideas, diversity and innovation, they came in different flavors and through different stories, but they were always there. And sure enough, when I arrived, I recognized exactly those two concepts and in this place.

[10:30](#)

Robert Vay:

Hmm. So, you know, so no organization is turn-key. You don't just jump into some place and begin running yet. So. So when you first got here in the summer of 2012, what changes in programming or infrastructure did you feel Mason needed to move on and to get even better?

Dr. Cabrera:

Well, I, I had, uh, the luxury that the university was going very well. Um, after 18 years of George Johnson and 16 years of Allen Merten, this place had great momentum. You know, we, we were large and growing ...research activities, um, were, were growing... the reputation of the university was growing. So, I did not arrive here in a situation of crisis, which is very nice. Yeah. Because it gave me the chance of opening a cycle of strategic thinking, of visioning, of bringing the community together to talk about what should this place be like in a few years. Uh, and that was really, uh, is really exciting. Some members of the board, I think, were a little more impatient and said, come on, you were just hired you, you must come with your plan and go. And it's like, well, you know, it's very important that whatever we do has a broad, uh, basis of support among, our faculty and our staff and our students and our friends and so on.

So what I dedicated, the biggest part of the first year. ... first it is not to slow down that, that momentum, to make sure that that continued, but we brought the whole community together through a whole number of events using appreciative inquiry and other techniques to really extract the mission, to write a mission statement, by the way, which at the time, no one even knew what the mission statement was. Yeah, there was one, but it was too long and complicated. No one really knew. So we needed a sharp mission statement. We needed a vision of what type of university we imagined in the future and we needed clarity around the values and the things we believe in. So that was step number one, brought it to the board with great level of support. The board enthusiastically approved it.

Went back to the working table to try to translate that into a strategic plan. Had great support. Sarah Nutter helped me on the first phase of this project, uh, who's now the dean of business at a University of Oregon. She helped me bring all the community together for the vision part. And then Michelle Marks, who's now our vice president of innovation and new ventures. She helped on the, on the strategic plan formulation, again, brought to the board... got approved by the board. And that's what really gave me the marching orders. So, uh, it was a luxury that not every new president has. But not just I, we, as a university, had that moment to do that. And it was crucial for everything that happened afterwards, it was crucial to have that clarity.

13:12

Robert Vay:

Yeah. And it's, and so it seems that you had immediate support from your staff, high caliber staff, people like Sarah and those folks. Did you have any other allies in the community early on? that you ...and you probably had a few?

Dr. Cabrera:

Well, uh, I had to build that platform of support because remember when, when you're an outsider.. and in higher education is not uncommon to, to bring someone from the outside universe. Uh, you basically, um, I'm like a Martian that has landed on Planet Mason and you know, people give you the benefit of the doubt and assume, well, you know, if they've hired this guy, maybe he has something to offer, but they're also kicking the tires and not sure. So you really have to earn the confidence. You get the job. But the confidence, the trust, the legitimacy to lead and to change, you have to earn... the trust of individuals you have to earn. We had a lot of turnover, natural turnover, but we had turnover in the senior team, our senior vice president at the time, Maury Scherens left very soon after his wife, who was our Vice President of University Life also left.

So there was, there was, uh, soon after that I think our Vice President of Diversity and Inclusion, uh, also left. I mean, there was a whole number of people....the provost agreed to stay a couple of years, which was great. I, I love Peter Sterns. I, I loved uh, getting to work with him for two years. So he gave me some stability on that, on that side. But, but the rest of this senior team actually did evolve and change during the first couple of years. And so I had to build those, those connections through the faculty. And, uh, and, and it's very important, by the way, that for any president that you don't sort of isolate yourself and, uh, and that you, you have to have, uh, friends, connections, people who don't mind saying: "Ángel, you need to be aware of this."

[15:22](#)

Robert Vay:

Yeah. I recall you were, um, your first deans and directors meeting ...you invited me to, to present. Uh, and uh, I remember meeting Dean [Kenneth Ball], uh, the dean of the Engineering Department who literally said he had just been there like a week.

Dr. Cabrera:

Absolutely. He, he was hired, uh, at the same time I was. I mean I was consulted during the process, but we were basically showed up at the same time, but, but that was also very important, hum, something that you did in some of those early meetings where we were trying to craft the, the mission. And I invited you a couple of times, uh, to provide a presentation about the history of the university. Cause I thought it was very, very important to ground the narrative about our future, to ground it on an understanding of our past and how we got here and to extract from that history, what are the themes, what are the elements, what has made us the great university that we have become and build on those. So I really appreciate the, the several presentations that I asked you to do that first year.

16:29

Robert Vay:

Yeah, that was, that was an honor. So what do you think was your first success as President of George Mason?

Dr. Cabrera:

Oh Gosh. Um, yeah, we, we, uh, Well , probably, I mean the, the, at the very beginning I think building the team, uh, and getting some new, exciting new talent on our team, that was crucial. Um, we, also getting some of the big projects, I mean, I had to very quick learn that trade of lobbying in Richmond and develop relationships. So we had, um, I don't know that this is the main, but I mean, just to give you one of the early projects, uh, we had a construction project, uh, which is now the, the Peterson Building, the Peterson Hall, uh, who was stuck ... Stuck because the Commonwealth had, uh, promised to and had budgeted funding for 80% of the, of the building. And the school back in the day had promised to, to raise private money for, for the balance and the money wasn't there and we needed the building. So sort of the, the politics of how we could really get that project going and, and, and um, and raise the money from the Peterson family who were absolutely wonderful and generous, but also getting a little bit more support from the Commonwealth. I mean that's one of the projects I remember like specific projects, I'm not sure that's the earliest one or the most important.

[18:03](#)

Robert Vay:

But getting it back on track was obviously ...because this was, you know, hearing about it, hearing about the concept that this would be a building that they could actually train people, You know, it's almost a medical building right on this campus, which no one ever imagined.

Dr. Cabrera:

Right.

Robert Vay:

And, and that would've been a big deal. And getting it back on track was a big deal.

Dr. Cabrera:

It was a big deal and now we have just a wonderful facility to enjoy that was built just in front of my office.

[18:37](#)

Robert Vay:

And you get to see it every day. So, so you, a couple of minutes ago, you were just talking about the visioning process with the BOV and it was, it was a pretty comprehensive document as I remember. It wasn't just, okay, here's our mission statement. It was, it defined what a, what a w you know, what we want to be, what are, what, what type of students we want to turn out, um, and what we want to do for the future. Um, so the available data suggests that we're sticking to the plan. And uh, and it's working. So, so what tangibles would you point to in order to define our progress so far?

Dr. Cabrera:

Oh gosh, there's, there's so, so much. And um, so for example, one of our, on the research side, so let me backtrack a little bit. The philosophy underlying our vision and then the strategic plan is this notion of access to excellence. This notion that we don't have to choose between being a, uh, a top research university and a university that is inclusive and that tries to make room for more students, that we can do those two things at the same time, which sort of goes somewhat against the, the general convention in, in Higher Ed and that vision and the idea of a university that he's, uh, an engine, uh, of innovation, uh, in a thriving community around us, a university that measures its success by the value that it provides to everybody that it serves, not by the accolades and the rankings. There's no mention to rankings on, on, on the, on the plan.

It's all about the value that we provide. I mean, all those are, um, in a way specific manifestations of that broader vision of access to excellence. And um, but that has translated into very concrete things. On the research side, we had a dream and on the plan we said our dream is we want to be at Research One university in the Carnegie classification. Cause being a Research One is not just a, an acknowledgement that we're now performing at the level of the top universities in the country, but also opens doors for more resources you can makes it easier to attract new faculty and so on. Um, we achieved that in 2015. Uh, those, uh, the, the, the, the numbers and the classification was redone in 2018 and we were reaffirmed. We're now at a Research One university, uh, which is again, not just a: "Rah! Rah! We're now a Research One." Uh, but it has very specific implications. It makes it easier when we are trying to compete to attract a physicist or an engineer or a computer scientist because now they're joining it, Research One university. On the access piece we said we want to grow ...Virginia needs more graduates. Virginia has a plan and the Commonwealth told us that we want to be the most educated state. We need more graduates, which guess what? Over the last four or five, six years, Mason has accounted for 64% of all the growth in Virginia. So, it's not just that we did our share it's that we did more than half of the work for the entire Commonwealth. We also said that our growth has to be inclusive. Well, the number of minority students we serve has increased by 35% we're now for the first time a minority-majority school.

We also said, by the way, we need to deliver value to our students. We need to improve graduation rates. We need to deliver more value to our students. But guess what? Our graduation rate has gone from like 64% to 70% and this last year we were admitted into the American Talent Initiative, which is a coalition of elite schools that graduated at very high levels. Virginia only had UVA, Virginia Tech and William & Mary in that group. Now Mason has been invited to join that group. So these are, these are very specific examples and by the way, they defy convention. You say, well, you cannot grow in diversity and perform better. Well guess what? We did! You cannot grow in size and deliver better outcomes. We did. You cannot grow in size and do the research... Well, we did! And really what, what is what is happening at this university... And these are, by the way, I relate these outcomes with great pride because I am really, really excited, not in a sense that, oh, these are, this is my score card, this is our results, this is what we have achieved. I'm, I'm, you know, I'm delighted to have served as president during this period, but, but this is really, uh, an incredible story in higher ed and a story that is not stopping here. I mean, I think that the, the momentum of this university continues.

00:23:30

Robert Vay:

And Dr. Merten used to say, "Every now and then there's a Mason moment where we do something that we get recognized for, you know, and during his tenure, it was the Final Four or, you know, something else, the *Forbes* magazine always putting us right up there as the, you know, the next best thing and so on so on ... So it's, it's, it's kind of the continuation of this Mason thing where we, every now and then we're on the radar.

Dr. Cabrera:

Well, I think, I think we're increasingly on the radar and people are paying attention. Part of my job of course, is to go around the nation is to tell the story of the university and people are paying attention because this is not, again, this is a very unique story in, uh, in, in American higher ed.

[24:18](#)

Robert Vay:

So, so George Mason and Fairfax, the City of Fairfax have had a very special relationship for 60 years and it was Mayor Wood 60 years ago that literally engineered a deal for us to be able to be here, uh, in a, in a really, um, emergency Sunday afternoon session of the Town Council. Um, so what types of initiatives, uh, has the university taken part in with Fairfax over the years to continue that bond to keep it, keep it together?

Dr. Cabrera:

Sure. Um, well first of all, it was fascinating to learn how all that history and learn it from you by the way has been kind of fun... to even participate in some events and lectures on the history of, uh, of this has been just great. I love that part of the history of Mason. The fact that .... because it is too easy to take these institutions for granted, you know? Now, students who show up here and say, oh that's George Mason, it's always been there. No. George Mason wasn't here all along, and there was the effort of specific individuals, Mayor Wood and Till Hazel's and members of the business community that pushed hard and Governor Holton who signed the legislation and members of the General Assembly and governors who've done their part during the, .... I mean it's, it's the work of individuals. And the key in that story is the founding act of a blind mayor of a newly established city, small city in, in northern Virginia. Somehow, um, working to establish the site here.

What I've told, I think I have, you probably know this better, but I think I've worked now with maybe three mayors in the last seven years. And my message to them has been consistent, which is: "you're not going anywhere. We're not going anywhere. We're bound to understand each other and work with one another". And by the way, if the city does well, the university does well and vice versa. We're tight. This is the destiny of these institutions or entities. Um, we'll, go together. So it's been fun to work with, uh, with the city to try to figure out how we., we've participated in design charrettes, uh, in the city trying to invent the future of the City of Fairfax. We've invited the city to our own charrettes, to envision the future of our, of our campus.

And now we have a couple of very specific projects, one with the county and one with the city that are going to expand residential opportunities for our students, which is, uh, one of the pin-points in the university. And now we're growing so fast we don't have sufficient residential capacity and financially we don't have the liberty to borrow and build this. So these are two projects where the city's going to be opening and, uh, a partnership with private developers, uh, really creating a residential facility in the City of Fairfax and the county right across the street near on West Campus. So these are two very tangible, uh, manifestations of working side by side... your neighbors.

00:27:46

Robert Vay:

You know what's really interesting, I was just thinking about this when you were talking about that latest, the latest idea with the housing. For as long as we've been here, Fairfax city still seems like a small town and it doesn't look like we have imposed any kind of sprawl upon it. We're still kind of the little college in the woods. All be it, you know, 38,000 right, exactly. And, and about a hundred buildings, but still it, it's still, I still, you still get that flavor of just that little college in the woods south of Fairfax. Whereas you know, you go to, for example, Charlottesville and the whole strip there, you know, you see nothing but you know, places selling UVA paraphernalia and tee shirts and things like that. We're still just kind of tucked in in here and we don't have ..... George Mason is not imposing. That's the thing.

Dr. Cabrera:

Yeah. But I think, I think, I mean there've been some nice gestures in the city and in even imagery and stickers on the roads, and banners and, and the fact that many of the restaurants, uh, accept, uh, that Mason money...And so I think, I think there are lots of symbolic things that are happening that are bringing us close together. There are other things, other opportunities that we missed. I mean, for example, when this university drive was rezoned and, uh, that was a totally missed opportunity, but it is what it is. And they was rezoned for a basically pretty high priced townhomes that could have been really the connection between the city and the, and the campus that could have been sort of a vibrant, um, commercial section of the city with restaurants and stores and so forth, so that they could have been a better thinking that would have really integrated and created that sense, more of a sense of, uh, of, of a college town. We missed, we missed that chance. When I arrived and I met our mayor at the time and we talked about this and he said, you know, I agree, but that's in the instrument

Robert Vay:

And stuff like that gets thought of 20, 25 years prior. Right, exactly. It's not like you can go back.

Dr. Cabrera:

Exactly every decision that you make in terms of zoning and urban planning, really the implications can be, uh, for dozens of years, if not hundreds of years.

[30:16](#)

Robert Vay:

Yeah. So, so Alan Merten used to jokingly call George Mason the best darn private school in the state system. Uh, you know, because of this perceived less than sufficient level of financial support from the Commonwealth relative to our size. So do you think that's fair to say?

Dr. Cabrera:

Well, yes and no. So, so we are, we are a public university, uh, and I always remind everybody, you've probably heard me say it many times, which is we have one shareholder only and that is the Commonwealth of Virginia. And we have to keep that always, always in mind. Ultimately whatever decision we make, is it serving the interest of the Commonwealth of Virginia? Now it is true that on the operating side, the Commonwealth of Virginia, just like most states in the Union have been declining in the level of support per student that they've provided the universities. And we're no exception to that. So that has forced Mason and many other universities to behave more and more in some aspects like private institutions for example, we do a lot of fundraising now and we're very proud of the results that we have achieved in the last few years.

But, but fundraising, which maybe even in the times of George Johnson may have been just a nice to have or a little bit icing on the cake to do certain additional things. As I say, it's no longer icing on the cake. It's cake, it's, it's real. It's a real part of, of our, of our budget. Tuition of course has had to grow tremendously in all universities to make up for that lack of public investment. But having said that, by the way, Mason has kept our tuition for institution in state students significantly below the average four-year institution in the, in the Commonwealth. So, so yes, in some ways you have to behave more as a private institution because you need to find resources elsewhere. But on the capital side, for example, and I think this is a fair thing to recognize. The Commonwealth for most of our growth has been funded by the state, by the Commonwealth of Virginia. So the new building just across the street than you, which is going to be the largest classroom building in a couple years. Hopefully it'll be on, on time, hundred percent funded by the Commonwealth... Peterson Hall for Health Sciences, 80% funded by, by the Commonwealth, the Potomac Science Center, I mean a lot of the growth that that we've seen in, uh, in, in sci-tech, I mean a lot of that has been funded. So, on the capital side, we benefit enormously from being supported by the Commonwealth. To have to be part of a, of a state that has a AAA credit rating that is financially very solid, which means that we can borrow at lower rates. So, there are aspects in which being public, having myself been in the private sector, it's very nice to have the support of a, of a robust, um, state system.

Robert Vay:

Yeah, and I think most people don't realize that it costs \$1 billion a year to run George Mason.

Dr. Cabrera:

Yeah. This, this year. I think we're even now, the budget for this year I think is now 1.2. I mean, yeah, it's a, it's a billion, I mean 1.2 billion. It's a pretty darn big operation. Very complex.

[33:57](#)

Robert Vay:

So, which issues have represented major challenges for George Mason during your tenure?

Dr. Cabrera:

Well, some of the biggest headaches we've had, um, have had sort of a political dimension, but I think it's very, very important that Mason continued to be an example of diversity, not just of people but of ideas. It is, you know, ever since I arrived and throughout my seven years, we, we tend to get, you know, complaints, sometimes pretty aggressive complaints from both sides of the political spectrum. There may be an elected official who disagree with something that one of our professors has, has written maybe an elected official or groups would disagree, for example, that we decided to accept \$30 million and agreed to dedicate the law school, ah, to the memory of Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. That that created a lot of controversy. So sometimes we have been criticized from, from the left side of the political spectrum or from the right.

And, and what's been very important in dealing with all those moments that people sometimes are upset that, that the Charles Koch Foundation gives us money, they provide a lot of generous support. Many of our students are the, the PhDs in economics for example, that the main source of funding is the Charles Koch Foundation. People don't realize that without that support, we would not have the world class economics department that, that, that we have. Uh, but some people trouble because they disagree with the ideas of Charles Koch. And so that, that has been sort of a constant source of controversy and tension. But I, I think going forward it's very important that Mason continues to be firm about this idea that diversity is not just diversity of people in demographics. It's also diversity of ideas. And as the society in the world we live in becomes more and more polarized. People don't talk to one another. They demonize the other because they disagree with our ideas. You go and make friends in Facebook or Twitter with people who agree with you or you watch the news that reaffirm your view of the world. Honestly, universities are the last free docs, the last places where you can really bring all ideas and expose students to all ideas. Um, so, so we have to resist. We, we have to resist those, those pressures. Uh, in the case of, of, uh, of the Scalia , when, when Justice Scalia died and, um, even President Obama at the time who ideologically could not be any more different. President Obama praised Justice Scalia for having been one of the most influential jurists in, uh, of our life, in one of the most influential people in the legal system in the United States. For a long, long time.

So why would we accept that name in our law school? Is it just because some of us disagree with some of his opinions? Well then what does that mean? Are we going to have to have a sort of an ideological filter as to what kinds of ideas are okay inside of the university and what kind of ideas are not? So we have to be very careful with that. And as much as that has been a source of headaches, I think it's also been an opportunity for Mason to show the type of place we are, then I hope we stick to, to that view of the world.

Robert Vay:

Right. And I, and, and I think that this sort of thing probably happens at most big universities because you can't, you can't avoid this. And then also you can't be a right-leaning university or a left-leaning university and still be up a public university. You can't just say, well, we only accept these ideas are left.

Dr. Cabrera:

Right, right. And, uh, but you know, we, we don't, we don't dis-invite speakers at Mason and we have speakers and events from all sorts of directions. Under my watch, We have had prominent, a prominent

Israeli Jewish woman be our commencement speaker and prominent Muslim Iranian-American be a speaker. We've had people of all backgrounds bring in all sorts of ideas. The way we get occasional heat from some end or the other. It's okay, we just have to stand strong and said, no, we need to protect that diversity. I love it sometimes when I'm walking across campus and you may have, uh, students who have a particular interest or ideology and they were campaigning for whatever it is and, and, and a hundred yards down on Wilkins plaza, there's a group arguing or defending just the opposite. It's like "I love it." This is, this is exactly what, what a university should represent.

39:18

Robert Vay:

Yup. Yeah. Because people have to make up their own minds. So what initiatives, events, recognitions do you see as major achievements or, or landmarks for Mason over the past seven years?

Dr. Cabrera:

The biggest one without a doubt in my mind is the Research One recognition. That's a huge, huge milestone. I mean, they, there are only about 100 to 130, changes every time they do the numbers. But about 100 to 130 Research One universities, they represent really the most research-intensive institutions in the country. The Ivy Leagues are in that group and the, the M.I.T's and the Stanford's and the flagship publics are in that, in that group. Mason is the youngest university in the country to be in that group. That, I mean, it's hard to exaggerate how meaningful that is. And it says, and this is by the way, an achievement of, of our faculty and the staff supporting them and the graduate students support supporting their work. This is our faculty every year competing in tougher, uh, research grant, uh, processes and bringing those resources in.

But that is huge...And again, as I mentioned earlier, is, is a huge accomplishment not just because, oh, it's nice to, to be one. It is because it opens new doors. It puts us in a different, uh, plain level though It's, uh, it's also stressful because now he's like, oh my gosh, we're sometimes trying to find metaphors in American sports, but I keep going back to European soccer. Where I come from is I always feel like Mason, the moment we said, yeah, well you're a Research One. He's like, oh my gosh. It's like a second division team that is now playing in the Champions League. And it's stressful too. It's like, wow, we need to build infrastructure and more labs, have more equipment? Now we're playing in the bigger leagues. But that's a challenge that is wonderful to have. And by the way, that I think is being addressed brilliantly by our team and now the, the research expenditures and awards are growing at an incredible pace. Uh, we just earned a couple of years ago a Center of Excellence from the Department of Homeland Security. This is like a 40 million plus award, a very multidisciplinary exercise. All of those can be traced back to the fact that we're now a Research One. So, I would put that really as one of our top, um, if you will, milestones that we have achieved.

[42:06](#)

Robert Vay:

So do you have any amusing or sobering anecdotes from your time here at Mason that you would share with us?

Dr. Cabrera:

Well, there have been, uh, there have been many, uh, amusing, uh, situations and um, many of them by the way, just in the context of, of, of my own, my own team. I'm blessed with, with the team. We've developed a great friendship and sense of comradery. Probably, the most shocking, uh, moment that I remember was right during my first year. And it was, I think, um, I forgot what was the,... I don't know if it was Mason Day, but I was invited to, uh, to give a speech about the university and what-not. And as I was giving my speech, I'm interrupted by this ... and people started looking down the hill. It was right by the Mason pond. They had brought the, uh, you know, the, the big head president that, that, that run in the, the Nationals, the Nationals, uh, which normally they run, um, uh, on, uh, during baseball games and they race. ...And so, they had brought him here and they were racing. And to my surprise behind them, they had an Angel Cabrera big head running behind them. And of course they, I think they let my other me, uh, win the race. And I was like, floored. I was laughing so hard. Like I could not believe they had done that. It was very, very weird.

Robert Vay:

Was that the first time you'd seen them?

Dr. Cabrera:

Yeah, I didn't know it was [inaudible] idea. They surprised me with it.

Robert Vay:

It was very good. I remember seeing it. Do you know what happened to that?

Dr. Cabrera:

I have no idea where it is.

Robert Vay:

You don't have it...

Dr. Cabrera:

I don't know where it is. But it's gotta be somewhere.

00:44:13

Robert Vay:

So say 50,000 foot view, how do you feel that, how do you feel GMU has changed over the last seven years?

Dr. Cabrera:

So at heart it remains the same place. Um, but it is, it is, it is bigger. It is, it is. Um, I think better recognized. I think it has better but, but probably the most important, I mean it has better recognition as I said, it's now a Research One university. It has improved on virtually every dimension. Financially it's better, academically stronger. Uh, it serves more students. We're more diverse. So all those things are, are real changes over the last seven years. Perhaps the one that may be less visible and to me is more important if I get it right. I mean some people may have different views, but I really feel like there is a stronger sense of self confidence about what this university represents. When I arrived, there was a little bit of, we still have that chip on our shoulder and, and sort of like we have to work harder, uh, to earn and that's good and healthy.

But there was a narrative about how well people don't recognize the type of university we are, even in a sense that we needed to fight to be seen as a, as a traditional university. And instead of embracing what's unique about Mason, someone's like, you have to do whatever UVA does or, or what Harvard does because that's what makes you be a legitimate university as opposed to say, no, we don't have to be like that at our game at what we do. We're much better than them. I mean 30% of our students qualify for a Pell Grant. Only 10% of UVA, only 10% at William and Mary, 30% of Mason. And when you look at student loan default rates were virtually have the same outcomes as UVA. William and Mary, very few institutions can do that, can claim that ...to serve an extreme population that is immensely diverse. That includes 30% of people with high financial need and that delivers outcomes that are comparable to flagship and elite private universities. So that sense of pride that we don't have to imitate with and have to do with all the others have done. We were blessed to have the university like a flagship university like UVA in the Commonwealth is a wonderful place to have and they do a good job of what they do. We're different.

Robert Vay:

Can you imagine, could you imagine the amount of first generation students at, at a UVA or at William & Mary?

Dr. Cabrera

Well, we have, we have a, as you know, 40% of our students are first generation in their families to go to school. So, all of that, what I, what I love is that it's not that it wasn't before, but in a way, I think we're more and more proud of that, as we should be. This is what makes this university exceptional and unique. So, to your question what has changed, my hope is... I hope I'm reading this well, is that we are, we have a stronger sense of confidence of what makes this university exceptional.

00:47:45

Robert Vay:

So what, what might we expect to see here at Mason in the future? Short term...long term?

Dr. Cabrera:

Well, I, you know, I can't wait to see, I mean, first of all, there are a few construction projects that, um, you know, I know that as I come back to, uh, uh, to Washington and northern Virginia, I'm going to be sneaking in and ... I can't wait to see the new classroom building here down... The expansion at Sci-Tech, this very exciting project that we're about to get going, which was funded partially funded by the Commonwealth as part of Amazon's decision to come to our..., um, that's another interesting story. So, we are going to build a massive building pretty large in Arlington in the site of the original building, the old department store. But it's more than a building that's going to be one element of what's really a plan to develop a whole innovation district in Arlington. In this plan, we're working with the county and we're working with private developers. So, in a few years that whole Ballston to Clarendon corridor is going to look very different. It is going to be really an innovation neighborhood with Mason at its heart. That's going to happen in less than five years, really, really exciting.

Sci-Tech is going to be different. There's going to be, um, I'm sure finally a town center next to our campus to really bring a lot more of that lifestyle and .... To that site. My prediction is that we may have a medical school at George Mason which .... the more I have looked into the issue, I think we're ready. I think the region will benefit enormously from a, from a medical school. We have some of our faculty and people in the university right now looking into it. So if, I'm trying to predict, I would say that in five years, George Mason will have his established a medical school, we will probably be different and unique and I don't know exactly how will it be oriented, but um, I'm pretty sure that will be also part of the university.

Robert Vay:

We've done nursing for 45 years.

Dr. Cabrera:

Absolutely. And, and, and, uh, we're doing lots of pre-medical, uh, programs and, uh, at the graduate level. We do a lot of bio health, uh, research as, you know, cancer research, infectious disease. We have tremendous, um, biology and biomedical innovation. So that's an element that would benefit not just the University, I think would benefit our region.

Robert Vay:

So, for 40 years ago people were saying, well, someday we'll have a law school.

Dr. Cabrera:

That's right. Maybe. And it was fought, uh, very hard by people in other parts of the state. And now we have one of the best ranked..... Is it top 50? Top 50 law school in the country.

00:50:45

Robert Vay:

So what challenges lie ahead?

Dr. Cabrera:

I mean funding is one. I mean, we cannot only...., there is a general trend which is not great, which is where we have seen a national decline in public funding of our universities, which I think is a policy mistake. But it's very hard to change because no one wants to run on a platform of raising taxes and without any more tax revenue, it's going to be hard to turn that around.

So it's unfortunate, but it is what it is. Closer to home, in Virginia, we still underfunded compared to our peers, we receive about \$3,000 less per student than UVA. Remember, we're serving a much needier financially-speaking student in any way, but we're like significantly underfunded compared to ...not just to UVA, Virginia Tech, William and Mary, VCU.... All those schools are getting significantly more money per student than we do. We're growing so fast, much faster than appropriations can grow. So, so that's an issue. It's going to continue to be a challenge, um, for the future of the university. But I trust that, that our elected officials are beginning to recognize that and recognize the value and may do something about it, but that will continue to be, uh, a challenge. I think, um, continued, I mean, getting rec..., I think there's a lag still, even though we were sort of closing that, but there is still a lag between what George Mason has become and how George Mason may be perceived by some people who are making pretty important decisions in our, uh, General Assembly. So I think closing that gap and making sure that people in the rest of Virginia appreciate George Mason as an asset for the entire Commonwealth. So, there are some of those issues that need to be, .... we need to keep them the mind.

00:52:58

Robert Vay:

So do you have any final thoughts about your time here at, uh, at George Mason?

Dr. Cabrera:

Wow. It's been, uh, the honor of a lifetime to be president at George Mason. Um, I love this place! And I love it in a, in a pretty personal way. I think the, the stories of many of our students, I, I see myself in them, even though I know we each have our own stories, but I've seen the power of higher education to change my own life. My parents didn't go to school, didn't go to college. Um, and I grew up in a, you know, blue collar neighborhood right outside of Madrid. What are the odds that you know, a kid from that, um, background, one day we'll be leading a major research university? It's all... And I'm the product of public universities, just like George Mason. You know, I went to public universities in Spain and then at Georgia Tech where I'm heading now as you know. So, so the stories of our students are, in a way, my stories and when I get to meet our faculty and staff, we all have those stories.

So it's been really a privilege to be part of this community. I know .. these are not just words. I'll remain a Mason Patriot for life. I'm now part of, part of the gang. I know I will be one way or the other... I'll find a way to, to remain connected to this. I'm so incredibly excited about the future. So curious about, you know, who's going to be our next president and to see, you know, the next wave of, of, of things happening at Mason. I'm really going to be, um, part of this one way or the other. But, but, um, maybe my, my closing, um, message is one of appreciation and, and, and heartfelt thanks to the entire community. I mean, we, my family and I, we've been ....just the support, the, just the, the warmth, the, the, the support from everybody since we got here has been absolutely unbelievable.

I knew all along that I would have to leave at some point. I mean, unlike George Johnson and, uh, and Alan who retired in the job, I knew ...I'm much younger than they were, so there was no way I can, you know, I can retire in this job. So I knew at some point in time I would have to move on. And I didn't think it wasn't going to be this hard, cause I really love what's what, what is happening at a, at Mason. So, we're, we're excited about the next steps, but, but it's, uh, it's really become, uh, a painful separation. I'm so grateful to everybody, to, to the faculty, to the staff, uh, to the, to the students. It has been just a really a, an absolutely wonderful chapter in our lives.

Robert Vay:

Well, thank you so much.

Dr. Cabrera:

Thank you for having me.