

Dare To Grow

An Interview with Daniel Diermeier, Chancellor, Vanderbilt University

EDITORS' NOTE An internationally renowned political scientist, management scholar and visionary leader, Daniel Diermeier is Vanderbilt's ninth chancellor. Vanderbilt named Diermeier chancellor in late 2019. In addition to his role as chancellor, Diermeier is University Distinguished Professor in the Owen Graduate School of Management and Distinguished University Professor of Political Science in the College of Arts & Science. He is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Guggenheim Foundation. He has published five books, with a sixth forthcoming and more than 100 research articles in academic journals – mostly in the fields of political science, economics and management, but also in linguistics, sociology, psychology, computer science, operations research and applied mathematics. Before arriving at Vanderbilt, Diermeier served in leadership roles at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, and at the University of Chicago, where he served as dean of the Harris School of Public Policy. He also served as director of the Ford Motor Company Center for Global Citizenship and, in 2007, received the Aspen Institute's Faculty Pioneer Award, called "the Oscars of the business school world" by the Financial Times. A first-generation college graduate, Diermeier earned a PhD in political science from the University of Rochester. He also holds master's degrees in political science from the University of Rochester and the University of Munich, and he earned a master's degree in philosophy from the University of Southern California.



Daniel Diermeier

INSTITUTION BRIEF Founded in 1873 as an institution devoted to "strengthening the ties which should exist between all sections of our common country," Vanderbilt University (vanderbilt.edu) has forged a tradition of academic excellence infused with a unique spirit of collaboration and collegiality. A private research university in Nashville, Tennessee, Vanderbilt is a global hub for learning, innovation and leadership. Its 11 schools and colleges offer students more than 65 undergraduate majors, a full range of graduate and professional degrees, and leading faculty. The 340-acre campus – an accredited arboretum just 1.5 miles from downtown – is home to groundbreaking interdisciplinary research, SEC athletics, and a community dedicated to free expression and civil discourse that lives by its motto, Crescere aude, dare to grow.

Will you discuss your career journey?

I was born in Berlin and began my academic path as a first-generation college student in Germany. I later came to the U.S. for graduate school, with two suitcases and a thousand dollars in my pocket. I started in philosophy but realized this path was not for me. I then quickly moved into political science, where I developed expertise in institutions, decision-making, and game theory. In part, this interest was triggered by being in Berlin when

the Wall came down. Over time, my interests expanded into management, with an emphasis on crisis and reputation management. That led to faculty and administrative roles at Stanford, Northwestern, and the University of Chicago, where I served as dean of public policy and as provost before becoming chancellor at Vanderbilt.

My time at Stanford was particularly formative. I witnessed firsthand how the university supported entrepreneurship and innovation in Silicon Valley, connecting research, talent, and capital to generate real economic and social impact. It reinforced the importance of collaboration and ecosystem and strategic alignment – how institutions can catalyze progress when positioned at the center of innovation ecosystems, working together based on a common vision and grounded in the same set of values.

Coming to Vanderbilt offered the opportunity to apply those lessons in a different context. Vanderbilt had strong fundamentals, talented faculty, and a collaborative culture. And it was ready to pursue strategic, mission-driven growth with intent. It was an optimistic place that did not think that its best days were behind it. Here, we could combine clarity of purpose and values with operational excellence and ambitious initiatives. I did not want to be remembered as the person who "did not sink the ship," and Vanderbilt and Nashville were the perfect fit to realize these goals.

How do you define Vanderbilt University's mission?

Vanderbilt University's core purpose is to provide a transformative education and path-breaking research. In a culture of inquiry and debate, we create a community driven by radical collaboration and unwavering commitment to academic, professional, and personal



growth. In practice, this means supporting interdisciplinary research, fostering entrepreneurial thinking, and cultivating environments where a range of perspectives thrive. Our mission is values-driven and strategic, and it shapes how we invest, structure partnerships, and prepare students for a rapidly evolving global landscape.

Vital to our mission – and a long-standing value that still guides us today – is the value of free expression. Open inquiry, wide-ranging debate, and the freedom to challenge conventional wisdom are essential to a university's purpose.

Free expression and open inquiry on college campuses are based on three pillars. One is the principle of open forums – a university's commitment to providing plenty of spaces where issues can be explored and discussed without the threat of censorship. The second pillar is civil discourse – an equally strong commitment to facilitating constructive conversation and debate among people of differing viewpoints, characterized by basic respect, a willingness to listen and be persuaded by the better argument, and a resistance to rushing to moral condemnation of opponents. Under the third pillar, institutional neutrality, a university and its leaders refrain from taking public positions on controversial issues, in word and in action, unless the issue directly affects the core mission and functioning of the university. It is critical to point out here that the principle of neutrality only applies to universities and their leaders, speaking in an official capacity – not to students or faculty.

At Vanderbilt, our practice of these principles dates back to at least the turbulence of the 1960s. Our chancellor at the time, Alexander Heard, said, "A university's obligation is not to protect students from ideas, but rather to expose them to ideas, and to help make them capable of handling and, hopefully, having ideas." We live by that same principle today.

What have been the keys to the strength and leadership of Vanderbilt University?

Vanderbilt's strength comes from strategic clarity, disciplined execution, and values-driven leadership. This includes thoughtful investment in research, faculty, infrastructure, and student experience – all grounded in our core values.

Innovation is central to our approach. We encourage cross-disciplinary collaboration and create structures that allow ideas to move quickly from concept to implementation. At the

same time, we apply business and operational discipline to ensure that ambitious initiatives are executed efficiently and with pace. Leadership at Vanderbilt is about moving intentionally, managing risk wisely, and making decisions that reflect our mission. This combination of courageous growth, disciplined management, and principled leadership has enabled Vanderbilt to maintain momentum, relevance, and credibility in a competitive higher education landscape that is experiencing a period of tremendous change and challenges.

How is Vanderbilt working to make higher education more accessible and affordable?

Opportunity Vanderbilt has reshaped access. We meet 100 percent of demonstrated financial need – without loans – and for all households with incomes of \$150,000 or less, tuition is free. That reaches roughly three out of four American families and extends to first-generation, international, rural, and urban students who might not have imagined attending a university like Vanderbilt.

But access is more than financial support. It's about recruiting broadly, supporting the transition to and from college, and creating a culture that is both challenging and supportive. Students are expected to stretch themselves intellectually, but they are members of a community dedicated to the same goal. Structured mentoring, academic resources, and intentional community-building are critical.

This approach reflects both values and strategy. Student talent is distributed widely, and institutions that can identify, recruit, and develop it will thrive. Providing access and opportunity is not only the right thing to do – it's central to building a high-performing institution.

How is Vanderbilt preparing students for a world increasingly influenced by AI?

AI is transformative across every sector. At Vanderbilt, we are embedding computing and AI literacy across disciplines through the newly established College of Connected Computing, and we are investing in research initiatives throughout the university – from biomedical research to the recently founded Institute of National Security. These efforts combine technical expertise with ethics, policy, and leadership, and they reflect the complex ways AI will shape society. Our goal is to produce students who are not just competent users of AI, but leaders capable of evaluating risk, shaping policy, and applying technology responsibly – skills that will be essential for leadership in the decades ahead.

What are your views on the role of higher education in driving U.S. innovation?

Universities remain central to the U.S. innovation ecosystem. Since at least World War II, supported by government funding and private philanthropy, universities have had a tremendous impact on our country's growth by

fueling innovation across health and medicine, agriculture, digital technology, automotive, and much more. They have been able to do this in large part because academic researchers can take risks that corporate research and development teams cannot. Universities are co-investors in this effort. For every federal dollar invested in research, we invest 50 cents. The Nashville Innovation Alliance, created with the mayor of Nashville, brings together partners from across sectors to expand the city's innovation ecosystem. The ROI of university research for society is very large. A conservative estimate in a 2020 working paper by researchers Benjamin Jones of Northwestern and Lawrence Summers of Harvard is that every dollar invested in innovation yields at least five dollars in social benefits – and possibly as much as 20. Universities that can convene talent, align capital, and execute strategically are the ones that will thrive in the innovation age.



Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee

What interested you in writing *Mission and Margin*, and what is the key takeaway from the book?

Universities often treat finance as secondary to mission, but financial strategy and discipline are central to achieving institutional goals. *Mission and Margin* provides a framework for aligning fiscal management with academic priorities. The key takeaway is that financial discipline and mission are mutually reinforcing. Strong fiscal practices enable investment in research, faculty, and student experience, while mission priorities guide resource allocation. Institutions that integrate these dimensions are better positioned for sustainable, meaningful impact.

What are the keys to effective leadership, and how do you approach your management style?

I focus on clarity, consistency, and execution, guided by values and principles. Effective leadership isn't just about making decisions quickly or managing operations efficiently – it's about leaning into core commitments – the purpose and values that define, differentiate, and guide you – and ensuring the organization acts consistently with them.

What are your priorities for Vanderbilt over the next decade?

Our motto, *Crescere aude* or “dare to grow,” is both a challenge and a commitment. It guides our vision for Vanderbilt, which encompasses three priorities: excellence in our operations and core mission, furthering our leadership in higher education, and pursuing bold growth – all made possible through our signature approach of multidisciplinary, cross-sector radical collaboration.

Among our growth initiatives are several developing efforts to expand Vanderbilt's presence beyond Nashville. We're advancing plans to establish a campus in West Palm Beach – anchored around business, computing, and engineering graduate programs – to meet the region's growing demand for executive education and workforce development amid its emergence as “Wall Street South.”

At our new campus in New York City, we are seeking to expand opportunities for students, faculty, and alumni to connect and collaborate with global leaders in finance, media, policy, and the arts. Plus, we are in conversation with Mayor Daniel Lurie and the City of San Francisco, exploring the possibilities of a downtown presence there.

These strategic footholds will strengthen Vanderbilt's national and international influence, while opening doors for research partnerships, internships, and career pipelines.

Alongside these geographic expansions, we're making major investments in research and continuing to build partnerships with industry and government to translate ideas into real-world solutions.

To dare to grow is to unite ambition, purpose, and courage – expanding Vanderbilt's impact while remaining steadfast in our mission. This is how we will position Vanderbilt as the model modern research university for the decades ahead.

In a polarized environment, how does Vanderbilt ensure its decisions are guided by values rather than external pressures?

At Vanderbilt, we are leading from foundational principles – excellence, free expression, and opportunity and growth for all – while advancing a comprehensive reform framework to modernize higher education. The choice for universities is not whether to reform, but whether to lead that change ourselves or have it imposed upon us. Reform born of real, collective work – driven by institutions committed to doing better – is the most sustainable path forward. In truth, it is the only path forward. Many universities have lost their way through self-inflicted challenges, and a posture of resistance fails because the American public demands reform. By anchoring reform in principle rather than politics, we ensure that decisions reflect enduring values, uphold academic freedom, and restore credibility of higher education in the eyes of the public. ●