

THE NAI PROFILE: AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. STEVEN C. CURRALL

Steven C. Currall¹ and Kimberly A. Macuare²

1. University of South Florida, Tampa, FL, USA
2. National Academy of Inventors, Tampa, FL, USA

Dr. Steven C. Currall, international innovation thought leader, experienced higher education leader, and scholar of organizational behavior and management, recently sat down for an interview with *Technology & Innovation* to discuss his new role as leader of a fast-rising research university, the innovation gap in the U.S., and the twenty-first century university.

INTRODUCTION

This issue's NAI Profile features Dr. Steven C. Currall—thought leader, university president, and scholar. Upon receiving his doctorate, Currall began his career as a faculty member at Temple University before moving on to Rice University, where he climbed up the faculty ranks to hold an endowed professorship. Building on his success as a faculty member and scholar, Currall moved into administration, which allowed him to have a larger role in charting the direction of higher education and permitted him to greatly expand his impact on student success. His extensive leadership experience, including roles as dean, provost, and vice president, has prepared Currall for his most recent challenge: taking the presidential post at rising national powerhouse and preeminent Florida university the University of South Florida (USF).

Currall received his bachelor's degree in psychology from Baylor University, his master's degree in social psychology from the London School of Economics and Political Science, and his doctoral degree from Cornell University in organizational



President Steven C. Currall (Photo courtesy of University of South Florida).

Accepted: November 1, 2019.

Address correspondence to Kimberly A. Macuare, Ph.D., Associate Editor, *Technology and Innovation*, 3702 Spectrum Boulevard, Suite 165, Tampa, FL 33612. E-mail: kmacuare@academyofinventors.org

behavior with minors in research methods and statistics, social psychology, and employment relations. In addition to authoring numerous refereed publications and several books in the areas of innovation, organizational behavior, and organizational management, he has also given presentations and written mainstream publications in his role as an international innovation and organizational behavior thought leader and been the recipient of over \$21 million in research grant funding for his work. As a recognition for his exceptional work as a scholar and as a higher education leader, he has been recognized with numerous professional recognitions, including fellowship in the American Association for the Advancement of Science; appointment as commissioner of the National Commission on Innovation and Competitiveness Frontiers; honorary fellowship in the International Academy of Nanobiotechnology; Ernst & Young's Entrepreneur of the Year Award®; and honorary membership in the National Academy of Inventors.

Currall began his academic career as a scholar of organizational behavior and management. Specifically, his early scholarly work focused on issues such as the analysis and measurement of trust in various work environments and the study of power and negotiation in organizations. More recently, Currall

has turned his scholarly attention to the topic of innovation and has published on a variety of related topics, including technology transfer, invention disclosures, and how best to promote innovation.

Most notably, his much lauded book *Organized Innovation: A Blueprint for Renewing America's Prosperity* has provided a roadmap not only for his own higher education leadership efforts but for the country at large, urging leaders to coordinate university, business, and government to create the conditions that foster innovation and that will help the U.S. regain its premier status as a technology leader. As the seventh president at USF, Currall has already started to work on his next ambitious project—taking a university that has recently risen as a top-50 research university and leading it to the next level of success, with a goal of making it one of the premier institutions in the country.

Dr. Steven C. Currall, international innovation thought leader, experienced higher education leader, and scholar of organization behavior and management, recently sat down for an interview with *Technology & Innovation* to discuss his new role as leader of a fast-rising research university, the innovation gap in the U.S., and the twenty-first century university.



President Currall speaking with USF students in the university bookstore (Photo courtesy of University of South Florida).

INTERVIEW

T&I: At the start of the search for a new USF president, there was a large pool of talented and experienced candidates vying for this position, and it's obviously a testament to your experience and skills to stand out in a such a group. What do you think set you apart and made you the right choice for USF at this moment when they are preparing for their next phase of development?

Currall: I think the breadth of my experience was a strength. I've been at public universities and private universities in both the U.S. and overseas, and I think that diversity of experience helped me. I've also been at universities that are aspirational institutions for the University of South Florida. That is, I've been to where University of South Florida would like to go, and that helps inform my leadership. Having been at three AAU [Association of American Universities] universities allowed me to suggest that I have ideas about how to reach our aspirations at USF. That experience, plus the breadth of my background, were the factors I believe as having stood out to the board and the search committee.

T&I: Of course, any job search is a two-way street. USF and the board are evaluating the candidates, but you, as a candidate, are also evaluating where you want to be. On the other side, then, what made USF the right opportunity for you at this point in your career?

Currall: I began as an undergraduate at a large public university. I have great respect and affection and empathy with our undergraduates because they too are at a large university. This is a sizable institution, so every undergraduate has to navigate through all of the fascinating challenges of figuring out the academic system and thinking about career paths. They are thinking about their social identity and who their spouse or significant other might be. There's simply a lot converging on 18- to 22-year-olds, and I can remember those days. That experience gives me a feeling of connectivity to the campus and to the students, especially the undergraduates. I also found the university very appealing because it had this great momentum and courage. One of the things USF has

is the courage of the community, the courage to have high aspirations. That's not true at every university. Some universities don't have that courage. I found that very compelling here—the willingness to think big and dream big and imagine what we might be. We're a great university already, but we are convinced that we can get better. I would like to be a part of that and try to make a contribution to that trajectory. The opportunity to be on that journey was very appealing.

T&I: I think it must be something in the water here in Tampa. Innovation and entrepreneurship are exploding here and being recognized regionally and nationally.

Currall: Yes, there is a spirit that's quite young, entrepreneurial, and innovative. I think the Tampa Bay region is a place of opportunity. In my inauguration speech, I posed this question: "What is unique about the University of South Florida?" My preliminary answer at that point was that USF is where excellence and opportunity converge. By that I meant that it's an institution that is very committed and interested in strengthening its academic excellence, but it's also a place of great opportunity and access to higher education. The fact that 41% of our students are Pell eligible is really impressive. We have terrific student success outcomes with 41% Pell eligible. Some of my colleagues in higher education can't believe when I give them that number. They say, "Do you mean 14%?" I say, "No, four one. 41%." It's amazing. It's powerful to enact real social mobility. *The U.S. News and World Report* now has a dimension on social mobility. We're in the top 10 in the country, and that's pretty impressive. It's something to be proud of.

T&I: That is really amazing and inspiring. Now, I know six months isn't a long time to be on the job and that new presidents tend to do more listening at the beginning, but in these six months, what do you think are the most important things that you've done?

Currall: I have aimed to help us continue our progress on consolidation. Consolidation is a substantial project. It's extremely complex, and I have devoted a lot of my time to that.

I've also been engaged in my listening tour, so I've been talking to everyone: the academic units, administrative units, such as the colleges, the police, and the

office dedicated to veteran success, among others. I'm enjoying that and learning about the institution.

This first year has been unusual because of the consolidation. We did a lot of that work in the first four months, so it was an unusual start to the job, but a lot of the work is organizational, and that's an area where I have many interests. The process has involved external folks such as state legislators. I have been involved in interfacing with many external stakeholders, and I've enjoyed that.

T&I: I've also seen that you are working on a campuswide initiative to promote community and instill a culture of civility. Can you tell me more about that?

Currall: Yes, of course. I think this campus already has a great community, but there's more we can do to articulate and reinforce that. That's why I've started the Principles of Community task force. It's a foundation for the strategic renewal process to rethink the strategic vision of the university. Whenever a community or an institution does that, there's always debate, different perspectives, different views, and sometimes disagreements. I hope that our principles of community will further equip us with the process skills that we need to have a vigorous and rigorous debate but do so in a way that is civil, inclusive, mutually respectful, and evidence-based. All of those are positive aspects of deliberation.

T&I: Do you think that universities, including USF, are reacting to our current societal moment, where many see that we lack some civility in our public discourse?

Currall: This is a time for us to redouble our commitment to having a university culture and climate that capture those dimensions to which we were just referring. Universities really need to be an exemplar of that kind of community and openness and inclusiveness. It's vital for us to reinforce that.

T&I: While you have extensive experience both as a faculty member and as a higher education administrator, moving into a role with a scope as expansive as university president must bring challenges. What have been some of those challenges, both things that you may have expected and those that have been more of a surprise?

Currall: There haven't been many "surprising" surprises. I expected to be surprised, but the things that have come up are not very unfamiliar.

This position is heavily external, and I welcome that. I like doing the external work. I did a lot of external work at several points in my career. For example, when I was the dean of the graduate school of management at the University of California, Davis, I was chief executive of an academic unit and business school. That role was very outward facing. My current role is obviously larger in scope, but the dimensions of the job are somewhat similar. My experience as provost at Southern Methodist university was also very helpful for understanding the breadth and diversity of different academic units in different fields.

I enjoyed being a dean, I liked being a provost, and I love being a president in the sense that I get to work with people from different fields, whereas as a dean of one unit, you're really mainly working with that unit. I mentioned breadth earlier when you were asking about the interview process, and I like the breadth of this job a great deal. I really like talking to people who have a literature background—or physics or business or engineering. I think that's a bit of the cultural anthropologist in me. I like learning about the different communities and cultures. I find that stimulating, and that's an exciting aspect of my job.

T&I: USF had a nearly 20-year tenure by President Genshaft and a steep rise in the rankings under her aggressive growth strategy. Clearly, USF has viewed itself, up to now, as a school that's on the march, as you said, to this bigger vision of what it could be. This is a new era under your leadership. How do you want to direct the next stage of that development to realizing the vision of what USF can be, and what do you see as your major objectives on the way to doing that?

Currall: I hope that that part of what I bring is a deep understanding of academic excellence and academic quality. USF is already a sizable institution, which is one of our great strengths. What I hope to do is to help us understand more deeply how to continue to elevate academic excellence, and that will require prioritization and deciding how to invest our resources, whether they be human, physical, or financial resources. That's

the strategic puzzle to solve: how to orient us toward truly greater, truly increased academic excellence. That academic excellence is a result of having great students, faculty, staff, and the alumni community.

There is a complex web of factors and variables and resources that drive academic excellence. The leadership opportunity, then, is to decide which lever to pull. Which area do we emphasize? One answer is faculty excellence. Faculty excellence drives the student experience. Students who have a great experience are well positioned to succeed in their careers and be productive citizens, who then give back to society and give back to the university. That support would allow us to do more at the university. It's a virtuous cycle, but a lot of it hinges on faculty excellence.

T&I: There is a phrase that comes up frequently in relation to your administrative work at UC Davis and SMU: the "21st century university." Can you define "21st century university" for us in a nutshell? More importantly, in doing that, can you explain how that's different than what we've come to understand that a university is supposed to do and why that difference is important?

Currall: A "21st century university" is more deeply engaged with society and the surrounding community or region than the traditional idea of a university, one that is an ivory tower. A high priority for me is how we engage and how we support and add value to the Tampa Bay region and to all three of our campuses. That comes down to having the capacity to adjust curriculum in light of societal needs or in light of the needs of employers. It also has to do with our service to society. Some of that is health related, in that the clinical work that we do is extremely important. Also important is knowledge transfer. I like the term "knowledge transfer" rather than technology transfer because knowledge transfer is much more inclusive and involves people from the humanities and the social sciences. There's a great deal of new knowledge even in the visual and performing arts. There's lots of new knowledge and new approaches being created there. There might not be intellectual property associated with those discoveries, but there's still new knowledge. So, I like to refer to knowledge transfer and how that knowledge then enhances the society that we live in. It really goes across all areas of the university. It's not just in the STEM [science, technology,

engineering, and math] areas.

T&I: I think that's one of the grand challenges of the educational moment in which we're living—the stark binary of STEM and humanities, and it's weakening us instead of strengthening us.

Currall: I recently read a book called *The Fuzzy and the Techie*, and the author, Scott Hartley, argued that the future involves the convergence of technical fields and the arts, humanities, and even religious, ethics, and political sciences. I agree. The future is not a divergence but a convergence. Steve Jobs is probably the most obvious example of the convergence of his technical interests and humanities and social sciences.

T&I: In your book *Organized Innovation: A Blueprint for Renewing America's Prosperity*, you talk about this American innovation gap that we're facing. Part of that is these divided efforts of the university and industry sectors, who are often working at cross purposes. Six years after the publication of the book, what kind of improvements have we made? What do we still need to do?

Currall: One of the ideas that we presented in the book was that the innovation process is not only about the free market. It's also about collaboration among academia, business, and government. I hope that there's more thinking in the future about how those three types of institutions work together. It's not just about the free market. It's not just about the lonely genius. It's not just that innovation is accidental and can't be orchestrated. In the book, we argued the opposite. We argued that leaders can create the conditions for innovation. They can *intentionally* create these conditions. Part of what we were trying to accomplish in the book was to illustrate what those conditions are. I hope that that is the direction that we will move, that we as a country will move toward. To remain competitive, we're going to have to do that. These strict separations between business and government or business and academe are not going to get the job done. I think other countries are more progressive in promoting organization, and institutional boundaries are more permeable. That permeability is very important. I hope that we see more of that in the United States in the future.

T&I: Do you think that anyone is getting this right already?

Currall: I think Florida is actually quite progressive at the moment in terms of higher education funding. In the last five or 10 years, there's been a greater focus on performance based funding metrics. Some people in academe are troubled by that. But, performance based funding is well balanced in Florida, and it has created greater accountability for our academic leaders, which then facilitates going to the state governmental officials and asserting that we deserve more support and are willing to be held accountable for it. There are other states that have performance based funding, but Florida is a leader. Leaders in academe shouldn't be troubled by performance based funding; it's part of the narrative that we can use to engage with people outside of academia about why what we do is important. If we're not willing to be accountable, then it's more difficult to argue in favor of additional public support for higher education. So, overall, performance based funding was a constructive development.

T&I: What role does USF or any other university have to play in the narrowing of our national innovation gap?

Currall: Universities are the neutral meeting ground for business, academia, and government, and we can bring people together, which is quite powerful. That's what great universities do. That's what the University of South Florida should continue to do. We're also a human capital magnet. We draw human capital into the institution and into the region. We educate, refine, and strengthen the human capital, and many graduates stay in the Tampa Bay region. So we are one of—if not the most—important, institutions for enhancing the human capital of the region. That's a very important aspect of our role.

T&I: You were recently inducted as an honorary member of the USF chapter of the National Academy of Inventors. The mission of the NAI is to celebrate and honor academic invention and academic inventors through its programs and initiatives. What role do you see the NAI playing in returning the U.S. to the top of the innovation pack?

Currall: The NAI and other similar organizations are crucial infrastructure for bringing people together and celebrating their accomplishments. The NAI helps break down those barriers we discussed across business, government, and academia. So, the NAI is a great institution that makes a big contribution nationally and certainly elevates the visibility of the University of South Florida. We're very fortunate to have to have it here. NAI builds our brand around innovation and entrepreneurship, which is extremely helpful.

T&I: As compared to the old guard organizations, do we need something like a new Academy, like the National Academy of Inventors, to break through that “This is the way we've always done things,” mindset?

Currall: The NAI elevates the role of invention. It helps legitimize invention as a meaningful intellectual activity. So, I think it serves a unique function different from any of the other academies. Some people have a dim view of invention, believing that it's not really an intellectual activity, but that's wrong. It is truly an intellectual activity, and the National Academy of Inventors adds further legitimacy to that.

T&I: I have to admit, I was really fascinated by the fact that you're coming out of the area of organizational psychology. Do you think the academic research that you started with when you were first a professor has informed your administrative evolution? How did what you think about leadership, innovation, student success, etc. grow out of that?

Currall: Most of my scholarship has been on trust in organizations, specifically how people build trust. I've published a number of pieces on that, and that has informed my thinking in this role as I have tried to engage with the university community and then build trust there. I've also carried out research on conflict management and negotiation, which is quite handy in any organization.

T&I: On a more personal note, doing this type of work—getting a Ph.D., working in academia, being a university president—is really difficult. What's your story? What made you want to dedicate your life to doing this really hard job?

Currall: When I was a freshman in high school, I worked part time in the library, and the librarian wrote in my yearbook that she thought I was actually an intellectual, but I just didn't know it at the time. That quote was in my inauguration speech. I actually showed a slide of the picture of the library with her writing in my yearbook. I didn't know anything about what being an intellectual was at that time. At that age, I was probably anything but an intellectual! Then, when I was in graduate school at Cornell, I was deliberating about whether or not to go into a business setting or go into academia. I had some experiences that led me to go into academia just for the intellectual freedom. One amazing thing about working in higher education is the freedom. There's really amazing academic and intellectual freedom, so during graduate school, that got to be more and more precious for me.

CONCLUSION

Despite his modest claims of having come into his intellectual legacy later, it is clear that Currall's trajectory matches that of the institution that he now leads, as he has risen quickly through the ranks of higher education to now take up his place as leader of a Florida preeminent university, one that is poised to join the ranks of the most elite U.S. institutions. As we wrapped up the interview, Currall was already looking ahead and imagining the next stage of that work, noting, "We already have a trajectory that is encouraging and appealing, but we're not done yet. We're not finished yet with where we want to be." Just as he has navigated his own path to success, he is more than ready to take on the role of mapping out USF's road forward. Indeed, given the reference to blueprints in his book title, it should not surprise that Currall started out as an architecture major, and even though his career path changed, his taste for building has not—just the medium in which he works. As he humbly puts it, "I like to see myself as an organizational architect. I still have these impulses to build, and now I'm trying to build an even stronger university." With his work on consolidating USF's three campuses, his task force on community principles, and his dedication to working across barriers to promote innovation, there is little doubt that he will succeed in doing just that.

FURTHER READING

1. Perry SJ, Hunter EM, Currall SC. Managing the innovators: organizational and professional commitment of scientists and engineers. *Res Policy*. 2016;45:1247-1262.
2. Currall SC, Frauenheim E, Perry SJ, Hunter EM. *Organized innovation: a blueprint for renewing America's prosperity*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press; 2014.
3. Currall SC. Three myths Americans still believe about innovation. *Huffington Post*. 2014 Mar 27.
4. Currall SC. Leadership lessons: what do executives from Amazon, Citigroup, and Whole Foods Market have in common? *Huffington Post*. 2013 Mar 27.
5. Elsbach KD, Currall SC. Understanding threats to leader trustworthiness: why it's better to be called "incompetent" than "immoral." In: Kramer R, Pittinsky T, editors. *Restoring trust: emerging challenges and emerging answers*. Oxford (UK): Oxford University Press; 2012. pp. 217-240.
6. Hunter EM, Perry SJ, Currall SC. Inside multi-disciplinary science and engineering research centers: the impact of organizational climate on invention disclosures and patents. *Res Policy*. 2011;40:1226-1239.
7. Currall SC. Nanotechnology and society: new insights into public perceptions. *Nature Nanotechnol*. 2009;2(4):79-80.
8. Perry SJ, Currall SC, Stuart TE. The pipeline from university laboratory to new commercial product: an organizational framework for technology commercialization in multidisciplinary research centers. In: Epstein M, Davila T, Shelton R, editors. *The creative enterprise*. Westport (CT): Praeger Publishers/Greenwood Publishing Group; 2007. pp. 85-105.
9. Currall SC, Inkpen AC. On the complexity of organizational trust: a multi-level co-evolutionary perspective and guidelines for future research. In: Zaheer A, Bachmann R, editors. *The handbook of trust research*. Cheltenham (UK): Edward Elgar; 2006. pp. 235-246.
10. Currall SC, Inkpen AC. Strategic alliances and the evolution of trust across levels. In: West M, Tjosvold D, and Smith K, editors. *International*

- handbook of organizational teamwork and cooperative working. New York (NY): John Wiley & Sons; 2003. pp. 533-549.
11. Schmidt SM, Geddes D, Currall SC, Hochner A, editors. Power and negotiation in organizations: readings, cases, and exercises. 2nd edition. Dubuque (IA): Kendall/Hunt Publishing; 2001.
 12. Inkpen AC, Currall SC. The nature, antecedents, and consequences of joint venture trust. *J Int Manag.* 1998;4:1-20.