To counter these trends, Xavier is striving for a balanced budget by tightening its fiscal belt. A long-term effort has been mounted to bring the institution's priorities into focus, fund-raising and development activities are beginning to bear fruit, enrollment has increased from 800 to 1,400 in the past six years, and grants from foundations and the federal government now total about $1 million a year—close to one-third of the university's total budget.

Awareness of the financial bird is pervasive at Xavier, among students and faculty as well as administrators. When they speak of programs such as the consortium involving their university with Loyola and St. Mary's Dominican College, two other New Orleans schools, they are apt to emphasize how this creates us as a family. But in spite of the money problems, student optimism is noticeable. They express satisfaction over the increase in black faculty members, the increase in male students, the return of greek-letter organizations and intercollegiate basketball, the presence of a black priest at mass, the involvement of students in decision-making roles and the improvement of the curriculum—and all these things have been in the past four or five years. Francis can't take full credit for the changes, and he doesn't presume to, but many students identify him with the spirit of them, and there is no doubt that he operates in tune with that spirit.

At the same time, he is not without critics. Some members of the faculty say he has handled delicate problems of hiring, promotion, tenure and dismissal in an arbitrary manner. There are those in the religious order who resent and fear the erosion of their influence under his administration. Some students and faculty members have raised militant and radical obstacles to his leadership. So far, Francis has handled the challenges with aplomb of a tightrope walker. Confident that he has a comfortable majority of the Xavier "community" with him, he has made himself accessible to all of them, spread the responsibility for decision-making far beyond the confines of his office, and made some tough and unpopular decision of his own when he concluded they were necessary.

And all the while, Xavier is changing—too fast for some, not fast enough for others, but apparently at just about the right pace for most of those involved or concerned with the institution. Governance of the university, which used to reside exclusively with the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, now belongs to a separate corporation, and next year its board will have a majority of non-SBS members for the first time. The university's administrative structure also has changed, and further adjustments may be made. The curriculum, once dominated by elementary and secondary education programs, is showing greater strength in such fields as pharmacy, business administration, sociology and the natural sciences. The student body, once all black, now has a white enrollment of about 10 percent—and at the same time, there has been a healthy upsurge in black pride and black identity among the majority of students.

Is it a black university? Francis says that term "means so many things to so many people, you can get lost in the rhetoric." It's a semantical thicket. What I say is that we are a university, and black is an adjective that helps to describe it. Blackness is a concern that flavors it—"it makes us different from Tulane. Black is beautiful, black pride, black power, black identity—all that's great if you need it, and it's necessary for many. But you can't make it a dogma. It's a means to an end, not the end in itself. We want to have a universal spirit that serves people, a lot of different kinds of people. Sure, there are certain kinds of students we want bad enough to go looking for—black males, Catholics, veterans, black diamonds in the rough—but if we can make it the kind of place we want it to be, we'll not only get them but a lot of other good people as well."