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Bright Side of the Moon

15 years after grasping a controversial Universal Church lifeline, the University of Bridgeport is enjoying an improbable renaissance



by Felicia Hunter

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This year, the University of Bridgeport celebrates its 80th anniversary.

There is much to celebrate.

The UB of 2007 boasts a diverse, international student body, holds educational conferences, plays host to civic and cultural events. Its graduate schools are considered solid pre-professional training grounds. It receives generous grants, and its students win noteworthy awards and honors.

It wasn't always the case.

Just 15 years ago, the UB seemed to be living on borrowed time. The institution faced mounting debt, dwindling enrollment, a long-term faculty strike and impending loss of accreditation. Closure seemed a sure bet among academic pundits.

The turnaround toward fiscal and operational health is due to a number of factors, say university administrators.

Aggressive student recruiting is one factor. Attractive graduate programs are another. Others are creative opportunities for faculty, partnerships with area businesses, a mutually beneficial working relationship with the city of Bridgeport, and better use and management of university facilities.

"We have simply focused on fundamentals," says UB President Neil Albert Salonen. "We started being more efficient."

But none of the adopted remedies would have been possible without a monetary cure that came in the form of a multi-million-dollar bailout from a controversial source.

In 1992, UB signed an agreement with the Professors World Peace Academy for what would eventually become \$110 million in support over the next ten years. PWPA is affiliated with the Rev. Sun Myung Moon and his Unification Church, labeled by many observers as a religious cult.

The university, loudly derided for accepting the funds, endured alarmists' warnings of "Moonie" (as Moon's followers are derisively known) control.

But faced with \$24 million in debt and the prospect of either closing or accepting PWPA's offer, UB chose survival.

The strings attached to the PWPA loan included the right to nominate 60 percent of candidates for board of trustees vacancies and the university's adoption of an educational philosophy centering on an international perspective. In exchange for adhering to those and other conditions, all loans



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were forgiven in 1998, and subsequent contributions were considered unconditional grants.

Large-scale PWPA contributions ended in 2003, when UB declared its financial dependence as a university. From that point on, the university has been self-supporting and has ended each fiscal year in the black, according to administrators.

"Because we no longer get any [loan] money [from PWPA], people don't seem to worry about it as much," says Salonen. "If nobody else brings it up, I don't bring it up."

However, PWPA remains involved with UB.

Salonen himself is a former Unification Church leader and PWPA insider: Before becoming UB president eight years ago, he was part of the PWPA negotiating team that brokered the agreement with the university.

And Salonen and the board of trustees still allow PWPA to nominate 60 percent of board members.

The question of changing the policy just never came up, says Daley.

"They've chosen to leave it in place," Daley says about what now amounts to an extended courtesy. "It's worked so far and nothing has happened from it," he says, referring to initial fears that the agreement would result in a rampant Unification Church takeover.

After the PWPA agreement was reached, the university focused on boosting enrollment.

The number of students attending UB was at a high water mark of nearly 9,000 in 1970, according to statistics provided by John Daley, the school's director of university relations. Although that number is somewhat inflated because of a rash of college enrollments sparked by Vietnam war-era student deferments, notes Daley, a steady decline from that point on lasted more than 20 years.

By 1975, enrollment had fallen to 7,293. Fifteen years later, in, 1990, the number of students had plunged to 4,278. In 1992, enrollment stood at a modern-day low of 1,383.

With students scrambling to transfer out of a failing university and few seeking to enter as freshmen, UB decided to recruit abroad and locally, using scholarship funds as a lucrative carrot. About \$10 million was allotted for

scholarships annually, says Daley.

"They began recruiting overseas, filling up the house with scholarship students because they needed them," says Daley. "They also gave scholarships around here, mostly to minority students."

By 1993, the downward spiral had begun to reverse itself. That year, UB student body rose to 1,605 students. The year after that, 1,939. By the turn of the millennium, some 3,000 students were enrolled in the Bridgeport school.

But if UB were to end its fiscal dependence on PWPA, it would have to find other ways to bolster enrollment and cut costs.

"The key is that we do not overspend our budget," says Salonen. "It was clear to me we were running deficits we did not need to be running because we were not willing to make some tough decisions."

Among those tough decisions, the university reduced the number of scholarships and kept faculty salaries - already a sticking point after three contentious faculty strikes in the past three decades - low in comparison to comparable institutions.

In 2003, faculty members saw no raises.

"We had to freeze salaries and pull in on benefits," Salonen says. "It was not pleasant - it wasn't done lightly."

It was effective, however. This year, faculty and staff saw a total six-percent raise in salaries and retirement fund benefits.

To increase student enrollment, "We have been focusing on what we do best: career-oriented programs," says Salonen.

Recruiters stressed career preparation, an international student body, internship opportunities and pioneering graduate programs, explains Tarek Sobh, vice provost for graduate studies and research and dean of the School of Engineering.

With a student body representing 36 states - albeit the vast bulk from Connecticut, New York and New Jersey - and 81 countries, "UB is a really wonderful experience not only to get to meet peers, it also reflects the workplace," says Sobh.

Recruiters tout the school as a place where students are prepared to join the workforce upon graduation.

"The word is out," says Sobh proudly. "Our students are not the kind of students that need a year of training when they graduate. They come [out of UB] ready to work."

There have been notable enrollment increases in several master's degree programs between the fall of 2005 and this spring. They include a jump from 276 to 410 students in the School of Business, from 124 to 345 in electrical engineering, from 80 to 172 in mechanical engineering, from 33 to 90 in technology management and from 93 to 275 in computer science.

Last year - three years after UB declared its independence from PWPA - total student enrollment leaped to 4,018, and at the end of the 2007 spring semester UB's total enrollment was 4,317.

That includes 1,550 undergraduates, says Audrey Ashton-Savage, the university's vice president for enrollment management.

Tuition for full-time undergraduate students for the full academic year costs \$10,575. And as with other universities, that number easily can more than double when costs for housing, meal plans and special programs, as well as miscellaneous fees, are added.

"We're looking to grow our enrollment over the next five years to about 2,500 undergraduate students," says Ashton-Savage. She says the short-term goal is to achieve and maintain a 50-50 undergraduate-graduate ratio.

More than 9,300 applications were received for the fall 2007 semester, and 5,300 of those applicants were admitted to UB, according to Ashton-Savage. Of those, 1,900 to 2,000 students are expected to enroll this fall.

Overall yield rates over the past few years have been about 35 to 40 percent, with graduate student rates somewhat higher than undergraduate, adds Ashton-Savage.

While more students bring more money to the university through tuition, "sound business practices" also have helped UB become financially stable, says Thomas Oates, the university's vice president for administration and finance.

"We made a number of changes with vendors," for example, says Oates. Also, instead of handling grand tasks such as operating the campus bookstore or mailroom in-house, such responsibilities have been contracted out. The

change improved efficiency and reduced costs, says Oates.

With increased enrollment and a stable campus environment, the university began to receive grants. Recent awards include a \$100,000 from the U.S. Soccer Foundation toward the construction of UB's air-conditioned soccer field and a \$500,000 state grant to build a new clinic at the university's Fones School of Dental Hygiene.

In addition, "Fundraising is growing strong again," says Daley. "In the last six years, [annual] contributions have risen from \$250,000 to \$2 million, and alumni participation is stronger every year."

Another revenue source includes private-sector partnerships for research and development projects, notes Sobh.

That goes hand-in-hand with the university's effort to attract faculty looking for an innovative environment, he says.

"Here, people come and work, and they know they can make a difference in the whole school. That's very rare," says Sobh.

UB also hosts events in partnership with city organizations, and it is reconstructing two former residence halls that the city will purchase to use a swing space as public-school building projects progress.

"We feel we're a very important part of the city of Bridgeport," says Oates.

Indeed, the fates of the University of Bridgeport and its host city are inextricably linked, says Salonen.

"What's good for us is good for the city," he says. He estimates that the university, which employs about 500 people, has a \$130 million annual economic impact on the local economy.

Today, the nonprofit, tax-exempt university is accredited by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges and its programs are licensed by the state's Department of Higher Education. UB professional schools, such as the Schools of Business and Engineering, and the Colleges of Chiropractic and of Naturopathic Medicine, among others, hold memberships in their respective professional associations. Student and faculty representatives actively participate in professional meetings, forums and conferences.

Most significantly, nobody at UB talks about closing the school any more.

"That's really very impressive when you think about it," says Sobh. "It's not

only phenomenal, but really exceptional in every single way."