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UB finally has 2020 vision

Simpson's plans and goals represent the call to success too long missing here

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Derek Gee/Buffalo News
UB President John Simpson has major ambitions for the university.

For years, maybe since Amherst got the new campus, maybe since Steven B. Sample left to regenerate USC, the University at Buffalo lacked two things: appropriate ambition and community buy-in to its potential greatness.

Those handcuffs may be coming off. UB President John Simpson, two-plus years into his job, is acting on his ambitions: UB plans to grow by 10,000 students and 250 faculty members, in predetermined fields; it seeks to dramatically increase its rank and status among the nation's top 62 research institutions, the Association of American Universities; it will use the opening next month of the spanking new Center for Excellence in Bioinformatics and Life Sciences as a lodestar to attract and exemplify universitywide excellence; and it will reorganize and expand in Amherst, North Buffalo and downtown in

ways that drive and support this region.

Will the plan succeed? No one knows. But to naysayers who regard Simpson's "UB 2020" template as another door stop, note this: UB leadership already came together to allocate money, define need and agree to hire 29 faculty members over the next few years. That's implementing the plan.

UB has a \$1 billion budget with 30 percent from the state. The rest comes from tuition, research grants, private sources, hospitals and other generated income. To build UB, Simpson needs more money. That's not likely to come from Albany. It will come mostly from new tuition and grants. In the last year, UB's faculty and researchers brought in \$250 million in grants, up from \$96.6 million in 2001. Excellence provides.

Simpson and his team, with input from what he calls a highly talented faculty, have challenges. The growth pattern is to lure students first, securing the revenue stream, with faculty hiring after. Simpson is thereby saying trust me, you'll teach larger classes for awhile, but then fresh colleagues will arrive to make classes average 20 students per professor. They'll gripe in the interim. Another danger in the process is that academic strength could falter in the push for more students.

He says the quality of applicants for top deans and other major positions is unprecedented. He notes that the Center for Excellence, before it even officially opens, leveraged \$11 million in seed money into \$55 million in grants. The center claims 4,035 jobs retained or generated. That's the new UB, he says.

There is also more than \$135 million going into pharmacy (South Campus) and engineering (North Campus) buildings, as well as a welcome downtown educational opportunity center.

There's a new \$7 million student services building attached to the business school, built mostly with private money.

Simpson seems to like the blocking and tackling parts of this game. But he's also a lab guy who says he'd be happiest jumping back into research at the new medical campus building. He has another priority, however: He wants UB to grow from being "just another state agency" into a major American research university.

All he asks is that the Buffalo Niagara community get behind these ambitions, support them and help make them happen. Many people waited many years to hear that clarion call.

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