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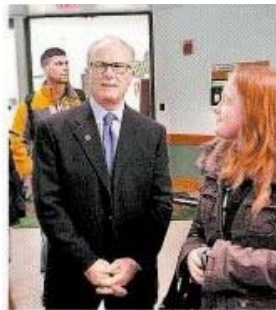
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FOCUS: UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO

Simpson plots a course for success

UB president believes the potential of the university for growth 'is huge' and it can bring the region along on its coattails

By JAY REY
News Staff Reporter
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Derek Gee/Buffalo News
UB President John B. Simpson went to the cafeteria to chat with students like Cassie Sahler in January.



Derek Gee/Buffalo News
University at Buffalo President John B. Simpson chats with sophomore Kiera Fitzpatrick, 19, during a recent lunch.

The latest prescription for Buffalo's economy isn't a big Bass Pro store.

It doesn't involve waterfront development.

And it has nothing to do with a downtown casino.

It is to make even bigger and stronger an already powerful entity that has been here all along: the University at Buffalo.

"The potential," UB President John B. Simpson said, "is huge."

Simpson believes he has a recipe for the university to grow and bring the region along with it.

What he needs is money.

That's why these days you'll find him playing host to business leaders, speaking with alums, talking to civic groups and meeting with lawmakers, as he gathers support for an ambitious agenda to expand UB by 10,000 students and 750 faculty and to build out its campuses - all over the next 13 years.

It's not going to be easy, or cheap.

If UB is to make that jump to the next level - to be in the league of UCLA or the University of Pittsburgh, for example - a large part will depend on aid and reform in Albany.

UB will have to be more aggressive when it comes to fundraising.

It will have to work harder to draw more research dollars.

And it will have to hustle to lure that many more quality students.

There are skeptics, for sure.

What makes others hopeful is there's a vision for UB and its three campuses - yes, three - at a time when the region's economy is moving toward the high-tech skills and talents at the university.

"In the past, what we had was an industrial economy and a university that did not specialize in that area. Now, we're seeing that alignment occur," said Richard M. Tobe, Buffalo's economic development chief. "The governor and his economic team see it, also."

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 - ▶ Eastern Suburbs
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Simpson is counting on that.

Simpson, UB's 14th president, has been lobbying the state for two possible options to help UB foot the bill.

One is a "differentiated tuition," which would allow the state's research universities at Buffalo, Binghamton, Albany and Stony Brook to charge a higher tuition than the colleges in the system.

That's how UB's Law School operates.

Another is instituting a "rational tuition" policy at state schools - imposing modest tuition increases for each new freshman class, while freezing rates for their four years.

Others have fought for both in the past and been shot down.

One of the concerns has been that state support for higher education will drop as tuition goes up, explained Assemblyman James P. Hayes, R-Amherst.

"If you're just taking it out of the pockets of parents and students, that's counterproductive," said Hayes, whose district includes UB.

But Hayes and other state delegates from Western New York are supportive of the vision for the university.

"Whether those goals are achieved or not only time will tell," Hayes said, "but I think the commitment and leadership are there."

And ultimately, he said, UB's success will depend as much on the university's efforts to raise funds on its own and run a more cost-effective operation.

"Their plans are very good, and I doubt they'll see much resistance from the local delegation," said Assemblywoman Crystal D. Peoples, D-Buffalo. "Now, whether there's enough resources to get everything they want done, that's another question."

Pathways to growth

Taking UB from 25,000 to 35,000 students would happen faster with the help of the state, but Simpson believes the school can move ahead, regardless.

"We surely can make some headway with what we have now," Simpson said.

That will take some doing, and include:

- Raising more money. UB's philanthropy efforts are bringing in about \$30 million or more a year, said Marsha S. Henderson, vice president of external affairs.

The university wants to double or triple that amount.

Boosting "major" gifts to UB is a need, as is having more flexibility to use the money where it fits into the university's overall plan, she said.

"We are under-performing right now," Simpson said. "We have a lot of room to grow."

- Increasing research dollars. Research funding at UB rose modestly the past year to about \$137 million, which is well short of the ultimate vision of \$300 million annually.

Since Simpson was recruited in 2003 from the University of California, Santa Cruz, where he was the No. 2 official, the focus has been on playing to UB's strengths and encouraging faculty across academic departments to collaborate on pursuing coveted research grants.

Using wisely the dollars UB does have to hire strong researchers will be key.

- Adding out-of-state students. Other state schools have expressed concern that growing UB would take away potential students.

Simpson, though, believes the university can grow, in part, by luring more out-of-state and international students, both of whom pay higher tuition. Raising the percentage of out-of-state students from 4 to 10 percent and enrolling 1,000 more international students are target goals.

On campus, there's some skepticism about the high aspirations, particularly among those who have been around awhile.

"From talking with people, they are very excited about the possibilities," said Peter A. Nickerson, chairman of the Faculty Senate. "I don't know if people are really thinking it's going to happen."

"When you talk to faculty," Nickerson said, "what they'll say is 'Where are we going to put all the students?'"

Planning for the future

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Simpson's plan includes a fresh look at needed facilities, infrastructure and design of its three campuses in Amherst, on Main Street and downtown, where UB has the Center of Excellence in Bioinformatics and Life Sciences.

Robert G. Shibley, a professor in the School of Architecture and Planning, will oversee the master planning and already has publicly discussed UB adding a mix of classroom, lab, parking and residential space downtown surrounding the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus.

"They've talked to us about making substantial investments in the City of Buffalo, and putting a lot of resources into the downtown campus," said Mayor Byron W. Brown.

"I'm glad to see the university moving in the right direction," Brown said. "It's critically important to growing our economy."

There are few publicly supported projects as important to the region, said Thomas J. Kucharski, president of Buffalo Niagara Enterprise.

"This is something we can do," Kucharski said. "We're not traipsing around the world looking to bring a company here. This is something we already have, and it's about as sure a bet we have had, or will have in the future."

But in the meantime, Simpson continues his pitch for UB, always reminding that more students bring more dollars to the area.

More faculty means more taxpayers, and research.

More research leads to high-tech spin-off companies that can help move Buffalo forward in a global economy, where knowledge and innovation are king.

"We've got the plan for what I think is moving to the next level," Simpson said. "The crux is figuring out how we're going to pay."

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