Strengthening a Culture of Philanthropy

John Chapple offers his thoughts on ensuring SU’s future as he retires as chairman of the Board of Trustees

BY DAVID MARC

John H. Chapple ’75, Chairman of the Syracuse University Board of Trustees since 2008, knows his way around governing bodies. He has had a place at the table on a dozen of them, ranging from regional communications companies and nonprofit foundations to such household-name enterprises as Yahoo, the NBA, and Nextel Partners, the telecom giant he founded and chaired before negotiating its multibillion-dollar sale to Sprint. Chapple is the first SU board chairman with a background in the new communication technologies that have transformed the way people organize their lives. When he steps down as chairman this spring, he will have transformed the board in ways that strengthen its capacity for action in the world he helped to shape.

Throughout his chairmanship, Chapple encouraged trustees to support the University with both financial resources and the know-how to use those resources in service to students. The 20 new trustees appointed during Chapple’s tenure have made the group younger and more representative of the University’s national and international constituencies, but the legacy Chapple is counting on is more than a demographic shift. “As a group, the trustees are not only generous with their money, but they bring us a wider definition of generosity,” says Chapple, who will be honored with a doctor of humane letters degree at Commencement 2011. “They add value to their dollars by contributing ideas and techniques, and keeping focus on the development of the projects they make possible. They set the stage for a philanthropic overhaul that is already under way. The long-range goal, as I see it, is to create a culture of philanthropy among the trustees in which the greatest satisfaction is gained by lowering the financial burden on every student who impresses us enough to be admitted. This—and not raising tuition—is the way to build a great university. Just look at some our most spectacular recent successes.”

At no loss for examples, Chapple points first to the satellite campus established by SU in Southern California to provide direct learning and acculturation experiences for students aspiring to careers in entertainment and the region’s other world-class industries. Building on the success of existing alumni-supported programs, such as the annual Hollywood Seminar during winter break and Aaron Sorkin [’83] Week during spring break, the Los Angeles Semester offers undergraduates extended immersion experiences as interns at production studios, talent agencies, and related businesses while giving them a taste of real life in the fabled city. The L.A. Semester was shaped and financed by an impressive network of SU West Coast show business alums led by Trustee Rob Light ’78, a partner in Creative Artists Agency. Trustee George Hicker ’68, who heads the Cardinal Company, a Southern California real estate firm, has been instrumental in securing facilities for the L.A. Semester and the growing SU immersion programs in architecture, sport management, and the visual arts. “Trustees and other alumni have been involved every step of the way in L.A., and in some cases they’ve even gotten their friends to pitch in,” says Chapple, who lives a neat 1,200-mile drive up the coast near Seattle. “I’ve been down there several times, and all I’ve heard from students are rave reviews about the internships and the contacts they’re making. L.A. is already being used as a model for planning new programs for our students at other locations around the country.”

Chapple is also excited about the Dubai summer engineering internship program, the brainchild of Trustee Abdallah Yabroudi ’78, G’79, who heads the Dubai Construction Company, a leading force in the eye-popping urban growth of the city, located near the mouth of the
John has been an exceptional leader for the board and University, and personally an extraordinary partner for me. John’s vision, insight, and energy—qualities that made him so successful in the corporate and sports worlds—have helped move the University forward in so many ways. John’s focus on growing a culture of philanthropy all across the SU family, along with his own personal generosity, has been crucial to the success of our most ambitious fund-raising campaign ever. I am thankful for having the opportunity to benefit from John’s advice, guidance, and most especially his friendship.

— Nancy Cantor, Chancellor and President

Gulf of Arabia in the United Arab Emirates. Chapple expresses special admiration for Yabroudi’s inclusion of a cultural component that brings students into contact with local families and regional history. “It’s not the kind of thing you expect to see in an engineering internship program,” Chapple says. “Of course, it’s just the kind of thing that’s needed.”

The sport management program, founded with the gifts and guidance of Trustee David Falk ’72—the sports “super agent” who practically invented the profession—provokes special interest from Chapple, who has headed sports franchises in both the NBA and NHL. “The quality of students attracted to sport management is remarkable—the average G.P.A. breaks north of 3.8,” Chapple says. “David and his wife, Rhonda [’74], have just come forward with a gift of $15 million to the program’s home college, which is a great example of following through on a successful project to benefit the entire University.” In honor of the gift and the Falks’ many contributions to SU, the University announced the College of Human Ecology will be known as the David B. Falk College of Sport and Human Dynamics. Chapple recalls meeting Falk in 1995, under somewhat different circumstances. “I was a part-owner of the Vancouver Grizzlies basketball team at the time and I was trying to coax Michael Jordan, who David represented, to return to professional basketball in a Vancouver uniform,” he says. “I knew then and there: David is the kind of guy you want to have on your side.”

Chapple’s most insistent concern as board chairman has been for students and families facing the challenges of paying for higher education. It’s an interest he came by early in life, growing up in Potsdam in northern New York State. Chapple’s father, John D. Chapple, was an admissions officer at Clarkson University who at one point was credited with recruiting three quarters of that school’s alumni. His mother, Helen Chapple, worked for Clarkson as a fund-raiser and then served as director of college relations for SUNY Potsdam. All five Chapple children attended Potsdam Central High School and went on to private colleges. “My dad was at Clarkson for 25 years, until he passed away, and my mother was at Clarkson and Potsdam State for 15 years, so I had no illusions that
leading the kind of intelligent, successful achievers who make up the Board of Trustees would be a walk in the park,” he says. “But I did have the advantage of knowing where they—and I—could do the most good. Frankly, it’s all about the kids—the students—you’ve got to remain focused on them. How do you nurture them to have great lives, great careers, and great families? Do you tie another tuition raise to their feet, or do you dig a little deeper to create conditions that allow the University to evolve philanthropically? Speaking for myself and for many of my colleagues on the board and in the administration, evolution is the answer.”

When Chapple gets on the subject of putting student needs first, he often mentions David C. Smith ’66, a now-retired SU administrator who instilled that value in him. “I met David when he worked with my father at Clarkson, before he came to Syracuse,” Chapple says. “He was always there to help me, my brother Paul [’89], and my son John Ross [’04] navigate our ways through college. He did the same for generations of SU students for more than 35 years.”

To stimulate the philanthropic evolution Chapple wants for SU, he believes trustees must expand their leadership role, a process that begins with openness and engagement. Presiding over one of the few governing bodies that already includes undergraduate and graduate student representatives at meetings, Chapple invited in representatives from two more constituencies—faculty members and deans—making the SU board perhaps the most transparent in American higher education. He also strived to define trusteeship beyond the board’s semi-annual meetings, encouraging board members to meet with students, faculty, and administrators so they can familiarize themselves with aspirations and put their resources and expertise to work in achieving them. He also advocates periodic reviews of trustee activity, a break with tradition that has been implemented at such schools at Vanderbilt and Penn. “This is not an honorific board, and ‘trustee,’ despite the sound of the word, is not an honorific title,” Chapple says. “We are a working group, and we’re working on behalf of thousands of young people who are trying to get an education and a start in life.”

Chapple’s eagerness to set new standards for trusteeship is borne of pride in what Syracuse has accomplished and fueled by optimism about taking the University to the next level. “At a time when many schools are struggling—especially state universities, which are feeling the heat of state budget deficits across the country—the quality of applicants to Syracuse has never been higher and our student body never more diverse,” he says. “That’s exactly why this is the best time for the private sector to step up its giving.”

Chapple has certainly led by example in this regard. His gifts to the University include the Chapple Family Professorship of Citizenship and Democracy in the Maxwell School; the Robin Toner [’76] Endowment (named for the late New York Times reporter, a classmate, peer-mentor, and longtime friend), which includes student fellowships and other features; and a cash gift that sped up completion of the Carmelo K. Anthony Basketball Center by a year. As a member of the search committee for a new head football coach, Chapple helped bring Doug Marrone ’91 back to campus, an accomplishment he doesn’t mind discussing. “It was a rigorous process, but the outcome was great,” he says. “We wound up with a wonderful football coach who exceeded our expectations.”

After the stock market tanked in 2008, Chapple learned that changed family circumstances posed direct threats to the ability of some SU students to stay in school. The global economic crisis got