

**STUDENT CENTERED**

**Syracuse redefines the research university.**

The reporter from *Financial World* magazine was interviewing Gershon Vincow about the changing face of higher education.

Syracuse, she said, is the institution many universities consider a leader in developing a more personalized approach to dealing with students and learning.

"Why Syracuse?" asked the reporter.

It was a question SU's vice chancellor was eager to answer.

"Up until 1945, Syracuse was a collection of undergraduate colleges," Vincow said. "Deep within the traditions of this University, there is a dedication to undergraduate education. It took from 1945 until roughly 1990 to develop the research university."

And now, says Vincow, SU is refocusing to become a research university centered on student needs. It's a vision the University has been wrestling with since Chancellor Kenneth A. Shaw introduced the concept shortly after his installation as SU's 10th chancellor in 1991.

That was a critical time for SU. Private universities were taking a financial beating, the result of unfavorable demographics and a steady decline in state and federal aid. With college costs rising, students and parents were shopping for colleges as savvy consumers, demanding to know what their tuition dollars were buying.

Higher education commission reports focused on weaknesses in undergraduate education; critics pointed to professors at research institutions who sacrificed students and teaching for their own scholarship.

Shaw instituted a five-year restructuring plan to address these challenges at SU. Belt tightening, he said, would not be enough. The long-term solution was to change the culture. Syracuse would respond to society's demands by becoming the student-centered research university, where promoting learning is the foremost priority.

Thirty-three initiatives were launched in early 1992 to eliminate the mass approach to dealing with students. Summer orientation was expanded. Programs were started to improve the first-year experience. Quality improvement efforts on administrative services were implemented.

All of it was done to show students that SU is clearly centered on their needs.

"I don't know of another institution that's a place that fosters learning for all its members, for faculty and staff as well as students."

That doesn't mean Syracuse plans to relinquish or minimize its research activities. The challenge is to ensure that research enhances the learning experience.

"In a student-centered research university, the culture is focused on learning in every part of the community," says Shaw. "It is a place that fosters learning for all of its members, for faculty and staff as well as students."

Response from the University community ranges from outright enthusiasm to skepticism.

"It's an exciting and important challenge," says Stuart Thorson, director of SU's Global Affairs Institute. "It's a shift in the University's self-conscious about what it is we're trying to accomplish. For all of us on the faculty, it's going to mean some degree of change in the mix of ways we spend our time."
We have to be creative about how to combine our scholarship and our educational responsibilities.

Sophomore Nicole Schlinger, president of Undergraduates for a Better Education (UBE), a student watchdog organization, says she has seen increased attention to student needs: "The design of Eggers Hall was built with learning in mind, the library has increased its hours, and the Kimmel Computer Cluster is open all night."

Still, her organization remains guarded.

"The concept of the student-centered research university is exactly what UBE has been working toward," says Schlinger. However, she says only time will show what criteria the University uses for granting tenure and promotion to professors.

Though it may be happening too slowly for some, significant change is occurring at Syracuse University.

"The concept of a student-centered university is not a radical one," says Shaw. "What is radical is that Syracuse University is using its resources to make it happen.

"People are taking note of what we're up to. Other colleges and universities have called for advice. Accrediting organizations have sent observers. Recently the Pew Charitable Trusts, a major educational foundation, included Syracuse among a select group of research universities to participate in a dialogue on this and other issues related to changes under way in higher education."

Becoming the student-centered research university is also an ongoing process, not a product, say Vincow and Shaw. Over time, they'll know the University is succeeding as government and educational leaders increasingly look to Syracuse as a model institution and top-flight students choose to attend Syracuse because of the University's unwavering focus on student needs.

"Right now, responding to what society says is important, Syracuse is first tier," says Vincow. "We've seen all indications from the outside world that people are responsive to what we've started." —RENEE GEARHART LEVY