University Building

SU has experienced major changes since the arrival of Chancellor Kenneth A. Shaw

In 1991, he came prepared for an uphill battle to take an already solid institution to world-class heights. Syracuse University needed to change its financial situation—a plight faced by many good and great colleges and universities. But at Syracuse, the key was to fix the fiscal problem while improving the quality of education. Today, as the 10th chancellor of Syracuse University, Kenneth A. Shaw stands at the top of the Hill, overseeing an internationally recognized student-centered research institution that is making its mark on the future of higher education. All of this on a reduced budget that only a visionary, but fiscally restrained, chancellor could accomplish.

Reflecting on his first five years at the helm, Shaw remembers well the challenges facing him when he came to campus. “We had a budget problem that needed to be addressed immediately, one that was defined by a task force put together by Chancellor Melvin A. Eggers before my arrival,” he says. “That work set the stage for what we would accomplish over the ensuing years.”

The budget problem resulted from economic and demographic changes that were affecting virtually every aspect of American life. Unemployment was up, pay cuts were common, and the pool of college-bound 18-year-olds was shrinking steadily. Despite these pressures, educational institutions were expected to maintain programs of the highest caliber.

In the midst of this adversity, Shaw took action to ensure that SU would become even stronger qualitatively. “When universities are faced with this type of challenge, they usually cut the budget and don’t do anything else,” he says. “Here at SU we did some budget trimming, but we also strengthened the institution’s academic focus and challenged the entire University community to embrace change.”

Gershon Vincow, vice chancellor for academic affairs, spearheaded the restructuring plan that would chart the course for the University’s schools and colleges. Meanwhile, the Chancellor introduced 35 sweeping initiatives to enhance instructional and student services—programs and projects that encourage student-centered ideas and motivate faculty to bring their scholarly work into the classroom.

“It was the perfect opportunity to take advantage of our resources and become a student-centered research university,” says Shaw. “SU crystallized its mission to promote learning through teaching, research, scholarship, creative accomplishment, and service by promoting the University’s core values of quality, caring, diversity, innovation, and service.”

These initiatives spawned numerous programs, projects, and scholarships to attract top students and assist them once they arrived. One such example was the founding of Black and Latino Information Studies Support (BLISTS).
Established in 1995 by Myra Linen '95, Jason Mills '95, and Anthony Percival '95, the student-run organization encourages African American and Latino students to excel by providing training in technical and interpersonal skills and promoting campus leadership and active involvement in the School of Information Studies.

Awarding the work of skilled faculty has become a vital part of SU's new direction. The Laura J. and L. Douglas Meredith Professorships of Teaching Excellence, for example, provide recipients with an annual supplementary salary award of $20,000, plus $5,000 for professional development. The William P. Tolley Distinguished Teaching Professorship in the Humanities provides an annual supplementary salary award of $12,000 and a $12,000 summer stipend, enabling SU's finest humanities professors to stimulate both curricular and instructional improvement.

Syracuse University's new focus on student-centered learning soon gained national attention. Last fall, U.S. News & World Report's America's Best Colleges guide named SU one of the top 50 universities in the nation based on student selectivity, faculty resources, financial resources, student retention, and alumni satisfaction. In a subsequent report on the nation's top 50 best values in universities, U.S. News & World Report ranked SU 35th. The magazine also named the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs' public administration program best in the nation and the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications' graduate programs first in broadcast journalism, 3rd in public relations, 10th in advertising, and 15th in print. The magazine also ranked SU's library science programs 4th, the School of Architecture 17th, the School of Education 41st, and the College of Visual and Performing Arts' master of fine arts program 20th.

Earlier this year, Syracuse University received the prestigious Theodore M. Hesburgh Award for Faculty Development to Enhance Undergraduate Learning. The award, presented by TIAA-CREF, recognizes the pioneering work of SU's Center for Instructional Development in balancing teaching and teaching-related activities with research to determine faculty compensation and promotion.

Through fiscal restructuring—which encompassed the latter years of the Eggers administration and Shaw's initial years—a budget reduction of $59 million was targeted. A 17 percent cut from academic departments saved $24.3 million annually, while nonacademic departments reduced their budgets 22 percent for an annual savings of $13.9 million. The balance came from a one-year freeze in faculty and staff salaries and a reduction in the University's transfer to its financial reserve. "Restructuring provided the means to enhance academic programs and make administrative changes," Shaw says. "It was difficult to do, but not difficult to want to do."

In addition, the University invested in a better working environment through Syracuse University Improving Quality (SUIQ)—a systematic approach to improving administrative services through training and development for all its employees. "To improve the quality of the academic and advising experience, you must provide the very best service to all your customers," Shaw says. "SUIQ is a mindset that forces the questions: 'What is it that we are supposed to be doing?' 'Who are we doing it for?' and 'Are we doing a good job?' That mindset is as important as any technique it tries to teach."

In spring 1995, coinciding with its 125th anniversary celebration, Syracuse launched a $300 million Commitment to Learning campaign. Funds raised through this endeavor will enable the University to better meet student needs, invest in new educational technology, excel in a competitive environment, and prepare for future needs.

Support from SU's alumni and friends remains key to the Chancellor's initiatives. Ruth Freeman Meyer '24, who passed away earlier this year, was a major contributor to the University and left Syracuse almost $12 million in her will, the largest single gift in the University's history. Last fall's Coming Back Together V reunion demonstrated the spirit of giving when several hundred African American and Latino alumni gave gifts and pledges of financial support. Corporations, too, are investing in the University's growth with substantial gifts.

Propelling a university toward world-class status requires a knowledgeable and understanding leader and the cooperation of the entire community. "Three things are necessary for private institutions that are experiencing this type of transformation: One is a vision, and we have established that; the second is people, and we have a commitment from the University community; and the third is support," Shaw says. "Contributions to the Commitment to Learning campaign are important because such support will allow this fine institution to grow beyond its potential.

"The successful universities will be those with a solid vision of where they are going and a plan of how to get there."

—NATALIE A. VALENTINE