THE CANTOR YEARS

BY CAROL L. BOLL

DURING HER DECADE-LONG TENURE, Chancellor Nancy Cantor pursued a vision that took Syracuse University to new heights, leading a transformation that expanded opportunities and forged collaborative partnerships on campus, in the community, and around the world.
IN EARLY SPRING OF 2005, CHANCELLOR NANCY CANTOR CONVENED a meeting with key University staff to give due diligence to a rather bold proposition: that SU purchase and convert an abandoned and sprawling seven-story former furniture warehouse on the city’s Near West Side—more than a mile-and-a-half from campus—into a dynamic academic and community space. It was an idea borne out of months of campus-community dialogue—an exploration of the “Soul of Syracuse”—during which Cantor repeatedly heard community members, faculty, and students voice their desire for greater levels of local engagement and a physical SU presence downtown.

Now Cantor listened intently to numerous reasons why such a proposition might not work—challenges relating to cost, distance of the structure from the main campus, student transportation needs, and inflated community expectations, among others. “These were thorough concerns,” recalls Thomas Walsh G’84, executive vice president for advancement and external affairs. “And the Chancellor took them seriously. We couldn’t guarantee that such an undertaking would work, but based on what she had been hearing from the campus and community, the Chancellor knew it needed to work.”

After the staff members finished presenting their concerns, Cantor simply said, “Okay, good. Now we know what all the concerns are. Let’s figure out how we’re going to do it.”

The stunningly renovated Warehouse—designed by architect Richard Gluckman ’70, G’71—opened nine months later. Today, it stands as a hotbed of multidisciplinary scholarship and learning, an architectural centerpiece and anchor for the aspirations of a struggling city neighborhood on the cusp of revival, and as a towering visual testimony to a leadership legacy built on collaboration, innovation,

“I think Nancy is one of the very first pioneers in challenging universities to completely rethink their role and recognize how they can interact as partners with the community to drive significant societal and community change. The conversation has been forever changed, and she is one of an elite group of leaders in the country who have helped spearhead this change.”

—MARY ANNE SCHMITT-CAREY, President, Say Yes to Education Inc.
and the tenacity to take bold actions in service to a powerful vision.

Chancellor Nancy Cantor has never been one to shrink from a challenge. And as she prepares to depart Syracuse University in January to serve as Chancellor of Rutgers University-Newark, she leaves behind a nearly 10-year record of achievement that has dramatically increased investment in traditional and emerging academic strengths, expanded conventional notions of scholarship, extended “classroom” boundaries to encompass community spaces like The Warehouse and new learning centers from Los Angeles to Dubai, diversified the “face” of the campus, driven fund raising to unprecedented heights, and enhanced the landscape and economic prospects of the city and region. It’s a legacy rooted in her fundamental view that the work of the campus is the work of the world. Cantor has called it the “two-way street of Scholarship in Action,” with students and faculty engaging in collaborative public and interdisciplinary scholarship that simultaneously meets real-world needs and advances knowledge.

Those who have worked closely with Cantor say the impact of that vision has advanced SU’s brand nationally and enhanced its prospects at a time when colleges and universities nationwide grapple increasingly with shifting demographic trends, concerns about rising tuition costs and unpredictable returns on investment, and growing demands for experiential scholarship grounded in real-world needs. “The most important thing Nancy Cantor has done for Syracuse University is help us become an institution that truly knows itself,” says Richard L. Thompson G’67, chairman of the Board of Trustees. “She has not only helped us understand the distinctive greatness of our university, but to see the trajectory that we must continue to set for ourselves. I can’t think of a greater gift or a more powerful tool for assuring our continued success well into the future.” Walsh agrees with that sentiment. “She has helped us understand our basic character and got us to focus, really for the first time, as a national and international university. She has emboldened us in working to create intersections with issues that universities can and must address—and she’s doing that with a student body that reflects the diversity of the country.”

INVESTING IN ACADEMIC STRENGTHS

Interim Chancellor Eric Spina was dean of the L.C. Smith College of Engineering and Computer Science when Cantor tapped him in 2007 to serve as vice chancellor and provost—the University’s chief academic officer. Cantor’s impact within that realm, he says, “has been, in a word, profound. She came in here on day one saying that great faculties make great institutions,” Spina says. “And she really has had faculty front and center.” In its most easily measurable sense, that support is reflected in the growth of SU’s faculty ranks. “About one-quarter of the full-time faculty here have been hired in the last four to five years,” Spina says. “And they’ve been across the full spectrum of scholarly modalities.” Overall, SU’s full-time faculty numbers have grown from just more than 900 to a total of 1,100 during her tenure. In recent years, the number of endowed professorships has more than doubled—from 48 to 100, including creation of the Marjorie Cantor Endowed Professorship in Aging, established by Cantor and her brother, Richard Cantor, in memory of their mother, who passed away in 2009.

“I was a little skeptical initially of Scholarship in Action. But I found it made my work more interesting. It made me ask different questions. And it required me to be more creative than I would have been by my own agency.... It didn’t make me choose one type of scholarship over the other. I’m certainly transformed by that experience, and my work won’t be the same. It just won’t. I look at things differently now.”

—JULIA CZERNIAK, Professor, School of Architecture, and inaugural director of UPSTATE: A Center for Design, Research, and Real Estate
Spina says Cantor also has provided strategic support to advance interdisciplinary programs and research clusters—from biomaterials and gerontology to entrepreneurship and environmental systems—that are increasingly essential to attracting stellar faculty and preparing students for the challenges of today’s workplace. Charles Driscoll, University Professor in the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, says the kind of student-centered interdisciplinary scholarship encouraged by Cantor as part of Scholarship in Action “is right in our wheelhouse.” Driscoll’s students have probed the depths of pollution in Onondaga Lake and partnered with local engineers to explore storm-water management. “From the very beginning of her tenure, she encouraged and promoted our local outreach, scholarship, and engagement initiatives and activities,” he says. “Her interest in this aspect of our work has prompted students to realize the importance of direct engagement with stakeholders on environmental issues.”

Professor Ramesh Raina, chair of the biology department, applauds Cantor’s support for interdisciplinary research and scholarship and credits her with adding several new faculty positions to his department. “In the last three years, we’ve hired 12 new faculty—many of them ‘opportunistic,’ or unplanned, hires,” he says. “That is just not typical. And the Chancellor’s office was instrumental in getting those positions and those people.” She also has helped to spur creative research partnerships through the Hill Collaboration, a cross-institutional initiative among SU, SUNY Upstate Medical University, SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, and the Syracuse VA Medical Center.

At the same time, Cantor has advanced a more expansive view of what constitutes scholarship, putting engaged scholarship on equal footing with more “fundamental,” data-driven scholarship and upending entrenched notions of the term itself to encompass the full range of disciplines, from hard sciences to the humanities. “She has made scholarship more inclusive and legitimized the work that a lot of faculty had already been doing,” Spina says. “That’s helped significantly in terms of valuing high-quality and high-impact interdisciplinary and publicly engaged work.” In 2009, upon recommendation of the University Senate, SU revised its tenure and promotion guidelines to explicitly provide opportunities to faculty who engage in public scholarship and to attract like-minded public scholars to SU.

Micere Mugo, Meredith Professor for Teaching Excellence in the Department of African American Studies, says those efforts have acknowledged and addressed the tensions that often exist between disciplines that base their research on hard data and those that don’t—in the process, validating the type of scholarship she and others in the arts and humanities frequently engage in. “Chancellor Cantor has literally transformed a lot of notions about what is scholarship, who are intellectuals, what can
The Syracuse Biomaterials Institute allows faculty and students to explore the use of biological materials. Located in Bowne Hall, the interdisciplinary institute was established in 2007.

La Casita Cultural Center, on the city’s Near West Side, is equipped with an auditorium, bilingual library, art gallery, and kitchen, and presents films, exhibitions, lectures, and performances.

they do in order to benefit the community, and what is the role of the ‘Ivory Tower’ within the community,” Mugo says. “I think scholars in some of the marginalized disciplines have felt recognized and embraced as contributors to the academy as much as anyone else. And I think this has enriched scholarship.”

**PUBLIC SCHOLARSHIP**

Cross-sector partnerships in which students and faculty collaborate with what Cantor terms “communities of experts” to address local concerns undoubtedly are among the most publicly visible emblems of her leadership footprint. Among the key public initiatives defining her tenure and driving opportunities for innovative teaching, learning, and both engaged and “traditional” scholarship: development of the Connective Corridor, a physical and metaphorical two-way street linking University Hill with key downtown venues; the South Side Initiative and South Side Innovation Center, multifaceted efforts to develop a sustainable business and cultural district on the city’s South Side; a precedent-setting partnership with the Syracuse City School District and national Say Yes to Education Foundation to promote academic success and opportunity for all city school children; the Syracuse Center of Excellence, a federation of scientists, engineers, and industry professionals collaborating on environmental and energy research and development; and the Near West Side Initiative (NWSI), a nonprofit-led effort to revitalize a long neglected inner-city neighborhood.

Marilyn Higgins was vice president for economic development with energy company National Grid when she first met Cantor shortly after the new Chancellor’s arrival. “She imme-
Immediately struck me as someone who was going to make decisions and move this community forward,” Higgins says. “She was exactly what this community needed at that time. We were stuck, and she has an energy that pulls things forward and moves them.” A year after that meeting, Higgins came on board as SU’s vice president for community engagement, and today she works from a fourth-floor office suite in The Warehouse. From that vantage point, she sees vividly the impact of The Warehouse renovation on the surrounding neighborhood, including more than $70 million in new capital investments and new office headquarters for such heavyweight neighbors as King & King Architects, O’Brien and Gere engineering firm, and WCNY, Central New York’s regional public broadcasting service. The Warehouse also serves as home to the College of Visual and Performing Arts design programs.

Higgins says her mandate was clear from the start: “To involve the residents on the Near West Side in all decision-making, to establish projects that act as a true platform for scholarship—she always, always said that—and to make sure we create relationships that are two-way. Nancy did not believe in the largesse of the University aiding the community. She believed we both had something significant to gain.”

Since 2008, the NWSI alone has engaged more than 800 students and 40 faculty in projects ranging from the development of “green” homes and energy-saving technologies to public art installations to the renovation of a former crack house turned into a community and learning space now known as 601 Tully.

“In fall 2006, the University hosted Small World/Big Divides: Building Bridges in an Age of Extremes, which examined conventional peacemaking efforts and new strategies for ending violent conflict.”

“Under Chancellor Nancy Cantor’s leadership, Syracuse University has moved to the top ranks of American universities. Chancellor Cantor’s creativity, imagination, unusually high standards, and boundless energy have left an enduring legacy.”

—ROBERT MENSCHEL ’51, H’91, SU Honorary Trustee

Say Yes to Education founder George Weiss H’10 raises his hand during a classroom visit at a Syracuse elementary school.

In fall 2006, the University hosted Small World/Big Divides: Building Bridges in an Age of Extremes, which examined conventional peacemaking efforts and new strategies for ending violent conflict.
crack house into a community center. Stephen Klimek ‘11, G’13, says the opportunity to participate in such public initiatives not only deepened his scholarship, but also informed his career aspirations. “Her vision of Scholarship in Action defined my undergraduate and graduate career at Syracuse University,” says Klimek, a member of the first School of Architecture class to study at The Warehouse and a former Engagement Scholar with the NWSI and Connective Corridor. “My experiences there reinforced the deep personal and professional commitment I have for using architecture and design to build a more just, equitable, and beautifully designed world for people from all walks of life. And the lessons I learned and people I have met along the way have continually inspired me to forge my own career path in public interest design.”

Beyond the Near West Side, students and faculty have worked with residents and children to promote computer skills and access; helped develop a community oral history project and virtual museum; created the Urban Video Project to showcase original art and literary works along downtown streetscapes; advanced research into the remediation of Onondaga Lake; and launched a neighborhood newspaper, among many other activities.

Linda Littlejohn ‘80, G’82, who has led the South Side Initiative since its inception in 2006, says these and other such projects span the disciplines and reaffirm the historic mission of higher education. “Historically, colleges and universities were always about social good,” Littlejohn says. “What Nancy has done, in a sense, is honor that tradition of scholarship.”

Cantor’s emphasis on innovative, interdisciplinary, and applied scholarship tackling contemporary needs of the community and world has spawned a more diverse research portfolio, with SU researchers attracting support from a range of private entities, foundations, and other nontraditional sources. “Nancy has been very clever at leveraging grant money from both private and government sources to great effect,” says University Trustee Judith Mower ‘66, G’73, G’80, G’84. Walsh agrees, noting that Cantor strengthened and expanded SU’s corporate and foundation connections as never before. “She knows how people think in the halls of corporate America,” he says, “and she forged relationships that would become big engines for collaboration.” For instance, the University’s multifaceted partnership with JPMorgan Chase spurred the creation of a global enterprise technology program and the SU-based Institute for Veterans and Military Families (see page 32).

In addition, The Campaign for Syracuse University, which successfully concluded last year after raising $1.044 billion, designated nearly three-quarters of funds raised to go toward academic goals, including expanding deanships...
“Chancellor Cantor, with tremendous vision, leaves a legacy of a more diverse student body, an administration and faculty attuned to the need for change, and wonderful new facilities. She understood that a necessary role of the University is to work for the betterment of the community in which it lives—a truly remarkable legacy to the administration, faculty, students, and Syracuse community. We who have ties to and love Syracuse University owe her a deep debt of gratitude.”

—DONALD NEWHOUSE ’51, SU Honorary Trustee

BUILDING UP

In the past decade under Chancellor Nancy Cantor, the University undertook nearly 40 building projects, which included acquisitions, constructions, renovations, and upgrades. Here is a listing of the buildings added to SU’s portfolio:

Carmelo K. Anthony Center
Center of Excellence
Ernie Davis Hall
Dineen Hall
Fisher Center, New York City
Green Data Center
Life Sciences Complex
Newhouse 3
South Campus Library Facility
The Warehouse
Whitman School of Management

and endowed professorships and enhancing interdisciplinary teaching, research, facilities, and technologies. That the campaign surpassed its historic $1 billion goal is another clear testament to Cantor’s resolve in the face of challenges, Mower says.

“People’s eyes rolled when she proposed that goal. Nobody thought it was possible. She lifted our fund raising up to an echelon that a lot of people thought we’d never get to. That is a remarkable achievement.” In 2007, Cantor and her husband, sociology professor Steven Brechin, contributed a $1 million gift of their own to the campaign. Their gift supported a wide range of academic and campus programs with which they have been involved or have a connection.

ACCESS AND OPPORTUNITY

Throughout her tenure, Cantor pressed to diversify not only notions of what constitutes scholarship, but also the ranks of students engaging in that scholarship. In striving to close what she has termed not an “achievement gap,” but an “opportunity gap,” she repeatedly has asserted that promoting access and opportunity for traditionally underrepresented groups meets an increasingly critical societal need and also deeply enhances the educational experience of all students, who benefit from a diversity of perspectives.

Institutional efforts to reach more diverse pools of students have paid off. A 10-year comparison of enrollment data shows that since 2004, the percentage of students of color rose from 18 percent to 30 percent and the percentage of students eligible for Pell Grants—a key indicator of socioeconomic need—climbed from 18 percent to 27 percent. Scholarship opportunities also have expanded, including the addition of a Haudenosaunee Promise

Newhouse 3 was dedicated in fall 2007, with U.S. Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. delivering the keynote address.

The Southside Community Coalition and SU’s South Side Initiative celebrated the grand opening of the Eat to Live Food Cooperative on South Salina Street in October.

Ernie Davis Hall, which welcomed students in fall 2009, is named in honor of the Orange’s Heisman Trophy winner.
scholarship for Native American students, and tuition for eligible Syracuse high school graduates through Say Yes and students from Atlanta, Miami, and Los Angeles through the Posse Foundation, a national nonprofit promoting college access for public high school students with high academic and leadership potential.

Mower also credits Cantor with recognizing the need to expand SU’s reach and visibility beyond the traditional, but increasingly shrinking, Northeastern markets to regions of growth, including Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, and the Southwest. “She has pushed the boundaries of SU out across the country,” Mower says. “She knew we had to position our brand in parts of the country where the students are increasingly going to be, and that was very savvy and ahead of its time.”

Maliz Mahop ’15 of Arlington, Texas, says while she never had the opportunity to visit Syracuse before enrolling here, the Scholarship in Action message she encountered on the SU web site resonated so strongly with her that she immediately decided to apply. What she had not anticipated, she says, was the degree to which Cantor made herself accessible to students. “After arriving here, I heard millions of stories from my peers about how she had listened to them and helped them,” Mahop says. As a sophomore, Mahop approached Cantor with a request to represent SU at a national collegiate leadership conference that fall. Cantor signed off on the request and provided support, and the two have remained close since. “She is way more than just the holder of the title ‘Chancellor,’ ” Mahop says. “She’s really inspiring. I have never seen a leader who cared so much about the students.”

SU’s strategic push into key regions of growth—termed “geographies of opportunity”—has expanded its enrollment reach into new markets and demographics, generated multifaceted engagement opportunities for
“As Chancellor and President, Nancy Cantor not only elevated the national reputation of Syracuse University through her ambitious ‘Scholarship in Action’ campaign, but she also played a key role in improving town-gown relations and spearheading badly needed economic development in Central New York.”

—VARTAN GREGORIAN, President, Carnegie Corporation of New York

“Nancy Cantor is the personification of ‘higher education as a public good,’ an extraordinary leader in the movement for public engagement, who has again and again taken bold, courageous, and pioneering action to redeem the democratic soul of American colleges and universities. She combines a broad vision with unique capacities to operationalize ideas.”

—HARRY BOYTE, Director, the Center for Democracy and Citizenship (Augsburg College)

students and faculty, and tapped the expertise of alumni in key industries that dovetail with SU’s own academic strengths. For instance, a new SU campus in Los Angeles serves as an engagement hub for prospective students and alumni and an academic hub for immersing students aspiring to careers in the entertainment industry in unique academic, internship, and networking experiences with industry professionals, many of them SU graduates. Closer to home, SU is expanding its presence in New York City with the opening of the Fisher Center, a new academic hub in the heart of midtown Manhattan. In addition, and in conjunction with its most recent fund-raising campaign, SU has established regional councils of alumni and friends to facilitate engagement opportunities and strengthen alumni connections in such strategically important metropolitan centers as Atlanta, Boston, Washington, D.C., Chicago, and the San Francisco Bay Area.

**NATIONAL RECOGNITION**

Cantor has written prolifically and presented nationally and internationally on the role of universities as “anchor institutions” in their communities, and on the importance of public scholarship, access, and opportunity. Her vigorous advocacy of innovative scholarship and expanded opportunity has generated national honors and awards, including the Carnegie Corporation Academic Leadership Award and American Council on Education’s Reginald Wilson Diversity Leadership Award. And it has advanced SU’s national profile as a university embracing its role as an “anchor institution” in the City of Syracuse and a public good. This fall, the Washington Center recognized SU’s extensive public scholarship initiatives with a 2013 Higher Education Civic Engagement Award.

Martha Kanter, undersecretary for the U.S. Department of Education who first met Cantor in 2009, calls her “an extraordinary higher education pioneer” and cites SU as a model for universities nationwide seeking to make a difference in their communities and world. “Nancy Cantor’s legacy is marked by a tireless commitment to the public good, changing the lives of thousands upon thousands of students for the better,” Kanter says. “...What [she] accomplished as Chancellor of Syracuse University will serve as a model for higher education in the 21st century as our colleges and universities strive to educate Americans to their fullest potential.” (Read more from Kanter and others online at sumagazine.syr.edu.)

As other universities look to SU’s example, they would do well to give their due to Cantor’s resolve and capacity to act decisively—whether the objective was an abandoned inner-city warehouse or a boldly ambitious fund-raising goal—in service to her vision of what universities can, and must, be for the 21st century. “She is hell-bent on making a difference in the world,” Walsh says. “And that has been key in both her leadership and in her scholarship.”

Spina, who as SU’s chief academic officer and a former dean collaborated closely with Cantor for the better part of eight years, says her passion for that work has been profound. “I can tell you that she is someone who would wake up in the morning and go to bed at night having given everything she possibly could to improve Syracuse University, to improve her community, and to improve the world,” he says. “She has given us all she has, and I certainly expect that this generation of faculty, staff, and students appreciates that now and will continue to appreciate it long into the future.”

—