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UPS president remains passionate about school after 11 years at helm

By C.R. ROBERTS February 10, 2014

Ron Thomas, President of University of Puget Sound, reflects on 11 years of leading the liberal arts institution.

His grandfather was a Methodist circuit rider, he was raised in the Baptist Church on the Jersey Shore, and even a casual observer could identify University of Puget Sound President Ron Thomas as an English major. His essays in the campus alumni magazine resonate with references to Wordsworth, Goethe, “The Upanishads” and the Gospel of John. And his bookshelves embrace well-thumbed offerings from Shakespeare and T.S. Eliot.

If the conversation stalls, he’ll be happy to quote Rilke.

As Thomas enters his 11th year as president, the school has seen its latest capital campaign grow to more than \$100 million since its inception in 2011, while the university endowment has nearly doubled since 2007. Under Thomas’ leadership, the school has been recognized as the nation’s top producer of Peace Corps volunteers from universities of its size, and a Top 10 producer of Fulbright Scholars for baccalaureate colleges. In 2012, UPS was named one of 40 “Colleges that Change Lives.” He recently spoke to The News Tribune in his campus office.

Question: Are you still as enthusiastic about your job as you were in 2003?

Answer: I don’t think I would have imagined I’d still have the sense of romance I have about this institution. I’m in love with the place — the people, the community. I’ve never run into more engaging, unpretentious, curious, intelligent people. These have been the best 11 years of my life.

Q: You recently visited the “Other Washington” and along with other college presidents met with President Obama, who has advanced the value of vocational education. Do you see your mission in conflict with that?

A: I certainly think it’s the case that not everyone needs to get a four-year degree. Everyone should have the opportunity to make that choice.

Q: So how does UPS fit into that?

A: We sometimes lose sight of the context, even in places like ours — a liberal arts college that is not pre-professional that seeks to allow students to explore, find their passion. We also believe that is the best way to find a vocation, the best way to be successful in any profession.

Q: We're in a recovery after a major recession. Was UPS seriously affected, either with enrollment or financial problems?

A: We've weathered the storm reasonably well — due to a long history of conservative fiscal management. We have a kind of built-in culture of innovation (and) entrepreneurship that has served us well. Our endowment was \$167 million in 2007, and at the end of 2013 it was \$302 million.

Q: And what about the economic effect on students and families?

A: We've seen a tremendous decline in family wealth since 2008. There is a much greater gap from what the family contribution is. There's been a dramatic increase in our student aid budget. (Families) looked to the institution to fill that gap at a time when the government was disinvesting. Those factors put a tremendous pressure on the institution.

Q: What does a year at UPS cost?

A: Tuition is \$41,000, and with board, tuition and fees it's just over \$50,000. About 90 percent of students receive some financial aid. Almost nobody pays that amount.

Q: Are the demographics changing?

A: We are making an effort to recruit more international students. Now, the population is 1 to 2 percent. The goal is 5 to 7 percent. A lot of institutions do see that as a cash cow. There may be some economic value, but our primary motivation is diversity of the student population. We've increased the number of students of color from 17 to 28 percent.

Q: The character of UPS has changed over the past few decades. Can you describe it?

A: There was a deliberate decision to return the character of the institution to an academically rigorous, liberal arts college with a national profile. That evolution has continued through (Philip) Phibbs, (Susan Resneck) Pierce and Professor Thomas, to consolidate on a single site, to focus on an undergraduate, residential campus for a total immersion, a four-year experience. In the 1970s, one-half of our students were commuters and transfer students.

Q: UPS hosted Tacoma's resident law school before it was sold to Seattle University. Now there's a group of people interested in building a law school at the University of Washington Tacoma. Any thoughts?

A: It depends on what hat I have on. As a loyal resident of Tacoma, and a fan of UWT, I'm cheering for them. When I have the hat on as a college president, (I see) that law schools have been a burden on the balance sheet, (so) I'm concerned. I have some ambivalence. I do have real hope it can come about.

Q: While the law school is gone, your business school has grown. What's the thinking there?

A: It's part of that three-decade transformation. The School of Business Leadership has professors in (fields including) accounting, history, law, ethics and marketing. We are one of the first liberal arts

colleges in the country to have a business school. We're immensely proud of it. It's one of the largest majors on campus.

The entrepreneurial, enterprising, innovative spirit that is part of the curriculum (is) one of the advantages as this part of the country is seen in just those terms, not defined by tradition but summoned by the future. That forward-looking orientation is palpable on this campus and in this part of the country.

Q: How would you assess the university's relationship with the city?

A: One of the costs of the ambitions over the past 30 years was a sense of abandonment, symbolized by the transfer of the law school. Those transitions had their costs. One of the reasons I was appointed was to bridge the gulf between town and gown. One of my primary (goals) was to reach out to the city of Tacoma and our neighbors to make it clear that our national identity was rooted in the strength of our location and the resources of our community. Academic excellence and civic responsibility go hand in hand.

Q: Do you miss the classroom?

A: Much more than I thought I would. I miss teaching a lot.

Q: What keeps you coming to work each morning?

A: One of the great aspects of the job is its unpredictability. Even though my schedule is locked in weeks in advance, something happens every day to change it. Sometimes it's a great surprise, and to me, that's what keeps the job the best in the world.

Q: You've been here going on 11 years. How does the future look?

A: The challenges for higher education are dramatic, on the one hand. On the other, the American system of higher education is the envy of the world. Creativity and innovation are inherent in the American academy. Our future is very strong, and that's particularly true for UPS. We don't have plans to grow. Long term it's not to get bigger but to get better. I'm probably as wide-eyed and optimistic as I was 11 years ago.

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