Next up at Case Western Reserve: a fresh strategy

University has emerged from budget woes, set to tackle new 5-year plan

By TIMOTHY MAGAW
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When Barbara Snyder took the reins at Case Western Reserve University in 2007, staff morale was low, the school faced a nearly $20 million operating deficit, and the public's confidence in the institution had waned considerably.

At one point, Progressive Corp. chairman and longtime Case Western Reserve contributor Peter B. Lewis derided the institution as “a diseased university that is collapsing and sucking Cleveland into a hole with it.” But after five straight years of operating in the black, Ms. Snyder today steers a Case Western Reserve that is far different than the one with which the outspoken Mr. Lewis took umbrage early in the 2000s.

With its finances in order, the university now is early in the process of piecing together its next strategic plan, which Ms. Snyder said will guide Case Western Reserve over the next five years and will take the school to greater heights.

“We’re starting this process in a different place than we did last time,” she said. “We’re starting from a better place, and we’re going to be even more ambitious.”

Now in its final year, the university's current strategic plan already has reaped benefits, particularly on the school's balance sheet.
Ms. Snyder's predecessor, Edward Hundert, had spent nearly $80 million of the university's reserves to transform Case Western Reserve into what he had described as the "most powerful learning environment in the world." It was a move that doused the institution in red ink for the better part of four years and led to Dr. Hundert's abrupt resignation after losing a no-confidence vote by the faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences.

Under Ms. Snyder's leadership, the university climbed out of the budget hole in the fiscal year that ended in the summer of 2008 by posting a modest $127,000 surplus thanks to cost-cutting measures, hikes in tuition revenue and a boom in research and fundraising dollars.

In fiscal 2012, which ended June 30, the university posted a $6.4 million surplus — a still-modest amount, according to Ms. Snyder, considering that the university had operating revenue that year of $973 million.

"We all understand the importance that every expense must be well worth it," Ms. Snyder said. "We have to be very careful how we spend our dollars."

Maintaining its books will be top of mind for university officials as they hash out Case Western Reserve's plans for the coming years. However, its transformation under Ms. Snyder into a fundraising powerhouse should help matters. The university in October 2011 launched a $1 billion fundraising campaign, which so far has brought in $787.5 million.

**The best and brightest**

The university's undergraduate enrollment has ebbed and flowed since Ms. Snyder's arrival, but Case Western Reserve has become increasingly competitive in attracting top-notch students, which Ms. Snyder attributes to a strengthening of the university's reputation in academic circles.

Last fall, the university welcomed its largest and most academically prepared class in its history, as 75% of the students who enrolled were in the top 10% of their high school class. In addition, more than 18,000 students applied for admission to Case Western Reserve's class of 2017 — a 25% increase over the number of applicants in 2012 and a 150% spike over those who applied five years ago.

Richard Bischoff, vice president for enrollment management, attributed the growth in applicants to his department's broader recruitment strategy in recent years. Mr. Bischoff said the university had been dependent on western Pennsylvania and Ohio for its applicant pool, but has intensified its
efforts elsewhere. The university formerly spent two or three days recruiting in California, for instance, but has extended those stays to three or four weeks.

“These are very positive and tangible things that parents and prospective students can look at and say, "This is a university where things are happening,"” Mr. Bischoff said. “You want to be associated with things that are moving forward.”

Case Western Reserve officials also say the university is benefitting from its increased focus on globalization, which led to the opening of the Center for International Affairs — a hub of sorts for the university’s international activity. The effort has established links with several universities abroad and helped double the number of undergraduate international students.

In fall 2007, about 3.2% of the undergraduate student body was comprised of international students; that number climbed to 8% last fall.

**Fortune favors the bold**

While the university will continue its efforts aimed at globalization and diversity in its next strategic plan, Case Western Reserve provost W.A. "Bud" Baeslack III said officials plan to do something "bolder" this time around. Dr. Baeslack said a steering committee made up of faculty, students, staff and alumni hopes to have a draft of the next strategic plan completed by this spring, with a final product ready for the board of trustees' approval by the end of the current academic year.

Ms. Snyder was cautious in describing the direction the university would take in the coming years, other than to say it would be “ambitious” and would be important for setting the stage for Case Western Reserve's 200th anniversary celebration in 2016.

"People are invested in a plan they helped create," Ms. Snyder said. “I can't pontificate about a plan I didn't create alone.”

But given the upward trajectory Case Western Reserve has been on with Ms. Snyder at the helm, many in the community expect big things.

“Her work ethic is superhuman,” Cleveland Foundation CEO Ronn Richard said. “I've seen her look so exhausted and then she'll get up on a stage and look like she just woke up. Her work ethic is second to none.”
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