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Exit INTERVIEW



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Western Connecticut State University President James Roach walks among the new buildings that were erected on the Midtown Campus during his 12-year tenure.

WestConn president Roach leaves physical, intellectual legacies

Thirty years ago, Western Connecticut State University mainly attracted commuter students who planned to be educators.

Now students, instead of leaving the state, choose the university for undergraduate and graduate level programs in liberal arts, business, the sciences and education.

When university president James Roach stands at the window of his office, he overlooks a black wrought iron gate and bricked walkways that now define the New England campus.

The 71-year-old educator will retire in July 2004 after 12 years as the university's president, leaving behind not just a physical transformation on campus. Academic decisions and groundbreaking associations he forged enrich the school's profile and provide students with unique opportunities.

In an interview this week, the Massachusetts native discussed his philosophy and motivation that guided his leadership.

By Eileen FitzGerald
THE NEWS-TIMES

Q: When you came to WestConn, what did you envision for the university?

Roach: Before I came here, I was at the University of Maine at Presque Isle. The interesting thing was that at Presque there was no central point to the campus. Where the center of the campus was geographically was the tennis court. I knew some tasks facing the university in Maine were to increase enrollment, strengthen faculty and redesign the campus. When I came to WestConn, it was a very same challenge only at a larger scale.

Q: What was your first step? Did you have to convince state leaders? What was your thinking as a leader?

Roach: My thinking was really, and my modus operandi was determined by the need. It wasn't what I brought to the campus. I looked at the campus and saw the needs. I talked to a lot of

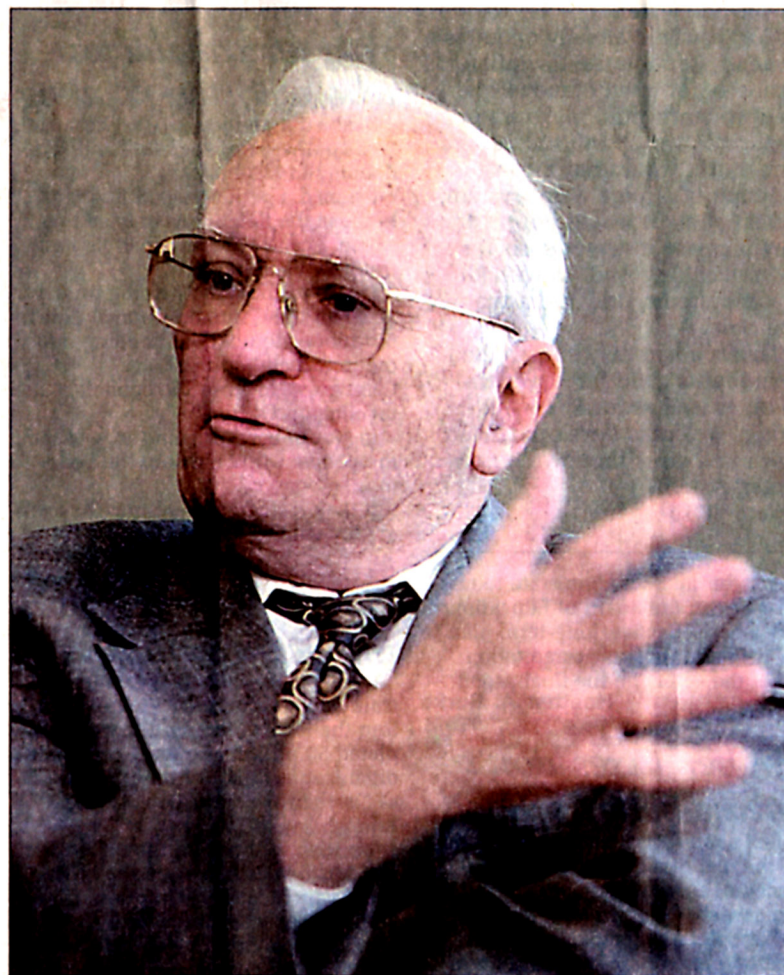
faculty and staff and determined the course of action to meet those needs.

In 1992, when I came, the university was running a deficit. We needed to balance the budget and to increase enrollment. One of the most obvious concerns was appearance. We needed to redesign the campus so we could attract parents and students. Parents very often determine where their children can go. We had these common tasks: to strengthen faculty, build academic programs, increase enrollment and balance the budget. So where do you start?

Before doing anything I spent the first year talking to people in the community and the faculty leaders who had invested their lives in the place. I had discussions with highly intelligent, dedicated people asking them what do we need?

We had to balance the budget, either get more money or cut. There was no more money so we had to do some streamlining. The two campuses posed a challenge. If you're going to redesign the campus, where do you begin?

In the center of the campus was a



parking lot, a particularly ugly parking lot actually. There really is something — how would I say it — if you are at a university where there is no center you don't look inward, you look outward. The focus was external not internal at the university. Psychologically, that's a mind set that is not particularly desirable. They were looking out onto Fifth Avenue and White Street and Osborne Street.

My first physical move was to build the garage and get the automobiles out of campus, to get the focus on campus life, to get pathways and trees, so you would see students crossing all the

time after classes. That will give the feel of a university, not just a look.

Then we looked at the library, which is the heart and soul of a university. It was not adequate but we asked where were we going to put the library for the two years when we added onto the library?

But, I'm getting ahead of myself. We needed to address student attitudes on campus. We had an old, inadequate student center on campus. Right after getting cars off campus, we attended first to refurbishing the student center. That took time since we had trou-

ble with a contractor, who we ended up getting removed. We needed a place for the students to go so we bought this building and used it as the student center for two years. We also got support for building Warner Hall which now has classrooms and deans offices. We moved the library in there.

Warner Hall was named after Truman Warner. It's the first building on campus that was named for a faculty member. It's a measure of respect for the faculty and I think it's important to name buildings for faculty.

I wanted to unify the university buildings with red brick, white facing and copper roofs and the people in the engineering department wanted that look, too, so we're continuing to do that with the new science building. Every very single walkway on campus was redone, so the copper roofing, the red brick, white facing, paver brick (sidewalks) and wrought iron fencing is defining us as a New England campus. In five years, there will be a beautiful green oasis on this midtown campus.

Q: You seem to have found a way to make the university relevant. The choices that have been made in your tenure reflect a more contemporary engagement with society. It wasn't a Latin doctoral program but one in education instructional leadership. How did you analyze society to say this is where you have to go?

Roach: Anyone who is in higher education is involved in continuing education, nonstop learning. I've been involved with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and the International Association of University Presidents. I go to meetings and meet colleagues and find out what we need. We are a state school. We have to be responsible with state money. One of the mantras of the state was no unnecessary duplications and I think that is valid. When we looked at the EDD, we were reminded that we have 100 years experience preparing teachers. There are more and more demands on education, especially when technology is no longer

▷ Roach leaves legacies

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just keeping records but is part of classroom instruction. We said if we're going to have a doctoral program, have one that provides for society and is educational. It was a natural fit for us and there were only 12 programs in the country like it.

Q: Looking back on some of the accomplishments, your association with the Smithsonian, expanding the number of students living on campus; these changed the external face of this university concretely. Did you see these things as important for the direction of the university?

Roach: Over the past few years we've added 800 beds to our residence hall. We had just under 1,000 when I came and now we have 1,700 to 1,800 spaces. We have increased enrollment every year, now we have about 3,800 full-time undergraduate students of which about 1,800 are on campus and we have about 200 students at the Wellesey Inn. Students want to come and have the experience of living in a dormitory. That gives a whole new feel to the university. It's not the place where students come and take their classes and go home. We also have our mission to be affordable and accessible. We have 1,500 part-time day students and we have to be a university for those people, too.

Jane Goodall came in 1994 and established a relationship with the university with her Roots and Shoots program. Now, she comes every year, and I serve on her board of directors. This year, we established the university as the national higher education center for the Roots and Shoots program. That was the beginning of going externally to get the community involved with the university.

We set out to strengthen our arts' programs and visual arts and created a Master of Fine Arts. We built up our music department with the symphonic band and jazz and have some wonderful musicians. It was through our music connection with Skitch and Ruth Henderson that we got involved in the Smithsonian Institution. That was terrific. It gives us access to so much. When we had the

James Joyce exhibits, we had material from them. When we opened our new planetarium, we had a space suit from NASA and our students will intern there in the summer. We have access to wonderful resources and there is the possibility of our faculty working with the institution. It's science, music and culture. It's a wonderful resource and we're their only affiliate in Connecticut so far.

Q: What do you consider highlights of your tenure?

Roach: The centennial. The reason is that it brought together lots of tasks that had been in the making for some time. First of all we brought alumni back and many of the alumni had not seen the campus. They were astounded. I wanted to unveil the university to the community so we opened it up Sept. 14 to the community and then we spent the year celebrating 100 years of accomplishments.

It was a way of instilling pride in the university, instilling pride in the faculty, staff and students, giving us a history, a recognition of a tradition. I'm very concerned with establishing tradition. Without a history, we don't understand ourselves. Our country doesn't understand itself. You have to have a history in context to see growth and development. Professor Herb Janick wrote a wonderful history of the first 100 years and we put a lot of faculty and alumni back into the stream of traditions. That was very rewarding, very satisfying. That to me was the highlight. It brought in history and tradition and accomplishment on the new campus in a great spirit.

Q: Where do you see as the next step for the university? What is the natural progression for an institution?

Roach: It doesn't stand still. Education doesn't stand still. Knowledge keeps growing. Right now we have some projects going. We're going to finish the science building that should be done in the spring of 2005. We're doing some recruiting of science students.

A new dormitory is going up that should be ready next August and a new student center should be starting very shortly. On the

drawing board now are plans for a center for fine and performing arts on the west side campus that would combine music, theater and the arts under one roof.

When we move the science department out of Higgins Hall I'd like to see that building turned into a technology center. We have a new \$4 million technology grant and there is more money for that I think. We could be a resource to people, educators and business people in the community. We could be a technology lab where they upgrade their technology skills. We'll have more room five years from now.

I would personally like to see a strong influx of international students. I've signed five or six agreements with universities around the world but we haven't been able to execute them because we haven't had the dorm space. We are in a prime location for international students and we have the programs they need like nursing, education, business and writing programs. If we consider New York City our laboratory, it's a great attraction.

It's the international students who enrich the curriculum in this global world of ours; their values, culture, language. It's wonderful for our students. I think there is no better way for students to get this. You can get it in History 101 or by living on campus with international students.

Q: What's next?

Roach: I want to get involved wherever I settle with local issues, not political, voluntary ones. It's one of the things we try to inculcate into our students, the need to give something back to society. We try it get them involved in charities and volunteer work. I feel very strongly that it is a unique aspect of America.

It's always a great privilege to work at a university with stimulating, feisty, independent people. Every day you learn something new, physics, mathematics, history, whatever subject you run into at lunch in the faculty dining room. Danbury has been a wonderful place, very supportive. It's a wonderfully diverse community, which gives it a wonderful vibrancy, I think.