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Subject Planning for the next 50 years

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Planning for the next 50 years

While Stony Brook's stature has grown, its president has also nurtured the small things that make a university a destination

BY OLIVIA WINSLOW
Newsday Staff Writer

March 19, 2006

Soon after she was named Stony Brook University's fourth president in late May 1994, Shirley Strum Kenny swung by the campus for a visit, accompanied by friend and noted architect John Belle, whose architectural credits include the renovation of Rockefeller Center.

As the two took in the university's decidedly stark physical plant, which seemed then to consist of large, colorless buildings separated by great rivers of concrete, Kenny turned to her friend and whispered in a tone of mock horror: "What are we gonna do? It's so ugly."

If it can be believed, there was a time when the campus had looked even worse, prompting a student demonstration in March 1968. Specifically, students protested the sheer amount of mud on the then-developing campus. "It was a mess...", said distinguished sociology professor Norman Goodman, a faculty member since 1964. "The students called the buildings that existed 'neo-penal' architecture."

As Long Island's largest and most prominent university embarks on a celebratory period marking its 50th anniversary next year - it is Long Island's largest single-site employer, among other superlatives - the dramatic physical transformation of the campus under Kenny's leadership is perhaps the most obvious change to outsiders. But Kenny's agenda has been far more expansive, and there have been far more muscular issues that cannot be solved with perennials and paving stones. She led an urgent and complicated overhaul of the undergraduate program (two-thirds of Stony Brook's 22,000 students are undergrads), presided over the development of new academic programs, guided

the campus through periodic budget crises and saw through the popular, \$80-million renovation of 26 residence halls.

That last initiative was a real crowd-pleaser and, said Frederick Preston, former vice president for student affairs, showed "a real aggressive commitment on the part of campus administration to really bring about major change in the quality of student life."

Kenny and others at Stony Brook, one of the four prestigious "university centers" in the 64-campus State University of New York system, want to let more people know where the university now stands. As the birthday milestone approaches, with Stony Brook remembering the days 148 students matriculated in the university's first home on the former Gold Coast estate of William Robertson Coe, a national advertising campaign is under way. Ads touting Stony Brook's breadth and depth are turning up in magazines such as Time, Newsweek and U.S. News & World Report, the New York Times Sunday Magazine and the trade publication The Chronicle of Higher Education.

Notable record

Kenny can be seen as a surprising choice to lead Stony Brook - as a scholar of 18th-century British drama, she is the first non-scientist to serve as president. But after almost 12 years of the Kenny administration, Stony Brook's increasingly heavyweight profile can be measured in many ways. There's all those paychecks - 13,500 in all. The academic reputation, solid even in the early days, is, by most accounts, excellent: Three professors associated with the university have won the Nobel Prize, and Stony Brook is a member of the prestigious Association of American Universities, a testament to its status as a top research university. And, with its 1,100 acres, Stony Brook is expanding its territory through its annexation of neighboring Gyrodyne property and the expected purchase of Southampton College from Long Island University.

It has been impossible for Kenny to please everyone as she has pushed the university forward on so many fronts; some faculty have expressed concern about Kenny pursuing these expansions without consulting them beforehand.

But there was still that dreary campus to contend with when Kenny arrived. The "neo-penal" architecture still exists, she noted, but with an estimated outlay of \$2 million to \$5 million, the once-windswept Academic Mall has been transformed. There are decorative walkways surrounded by landscaping, a large fountain and benches to promote interaction among the campus community. More recently, the nondescript concrete space outside the university's Staller Center for the Arts has been refashioned into a grassy amphitheater.

"I don't think I realized how important it was when we started," Kenny said in an interview in her third-floor office with a view of one of the university's newest structures, the \$50-million Charles B. Wang Asian American Center that opened in 2002, a gift from the Computer Associates co-founder. "But what I have learned subsequently ... what it says is this is an important place where important things are going on. This is a place that respects what is happening here." And it pays dividends, she noted, in attracting good students.

The transformation is appreciated. "I've been through the sea of mud and all the problems there. There's no comparison to how it looks now," said F. James Rohlf, distinguished professor in the Department of Ecology and Evolution, who's been on the faculty since 1969. "It's a subtle thing," Rohlf added.

"Having a nice environment, clean, pleasant - it affects you," he said. "So spending some money on nice-looking things, the lawn, the fountain, I think it's psychologically necessary."

Island blues

But even as Kenny points with pride to the university's steady progress to its goal of national prominence, on par with the top research universities in the nation, she also acknowledges a troubling paradox: As highly regarded as the university is around the nation, it apparently is far less revered on Long Island itself.

On that point, Alan Tucker, a distinguished teaching professor of applied math, said Stony Brook had a reputation in Silicon Valley, a hotbed of technological innovation, as "equivalent to an Ivy League school. It's not viewed that way on Long Island."

Said Kenny, "If you are in Wisconsin, they know Madison is a great university." She doesn't say it, but that's not necessarily how people in New York State, much less on Long Island, view Stony Brook University. To change the perceptions over the long-term, she knows she must improve the already improving student body. The university is aggressively recruiting students, reaching out nationally in a more concerted way, and by offering scholarships to valedictorians and salutatorians. It appears to be working. SAT scores for entering students are up 120 points in the last decade. Last fall's freshmen class posted average scores of 1,213 out of a then-perfect 1,600.

Eye on the prize

To boost the image of the university on Long Island, Kenny follows a simple philosophy: You can only be great nationally, or internationally, if you are great locally. The university's hospital complex, dominated by the modernist towers rising along Nicolls Road, is the most obvious form of service to the region, she said. She also enjoys pointing to a 2003 university study that found the university's economic impact on the Island economy totaled some \$2.5 billion annually.

The 13,500 workers alone "is pretty significant" for Long Island's economy, said Mitch Pally, vice president for government affairs of the Long Island Association, a business group. Pally said Stony Brook also was valuable for its ability to attract businesses and its research.

Other university highlights include:

High rankings in national and international lists of higher education institutions.

The London Times Higher Education Supplement in 2004, for instance, placed Stony Brook at 136 among more than 8,300 universities worldwide and in the top 50 in North America. Meanwhile, U.S. News & World Report ranked Stony Brook 97th among the best national universities last fall, 20 slots higher than two years ago, and 45th among the top 50 public national universities.

Membership in the invitation-only Association of American Universities in 2001, along with 61 other research universities, including Ivy League institutions and prominent New York universities, such as Columbia, Cornell, New York University, Syracuse, University of Rochester and SUNY's University at Buffalo.

The university's first-ever capital campaign in which it is seeking to raise \$300 million.

Enrollment growth that is up 4,400 from 1994, to just over 22,000 for graduates and undergraduates.

Generating about \$160 million in research funding annually.

What Kenny called "probably the most extraordinary accomplishment" during her tenure can't be reduced to a media rating or a budget-line item.

Criticism from an accrediting body prompted her to establish the Boyer Commission in 1995 to study ways to improve undergraduate education. The result: A wholesale restructuring, with the establishment of freshman seminars and undergraduate colleges that offer more interaction with faculty, as well as getting undergraduates involved in research that had been primarily the preserve of graduate students. Kenny chaired the Boyer Commission herself, and the panel's work has achieved an influential status nationwide - more than 100 U.S. universities have asked for copies of the report.

Positive gains

Brent Lindquist, associate chair in the Applied Math and Statistics Department and University Senate president, said undergraduate education has "greatly improved." Also, he said, "She's touched many of the issues that go toward improving student satisfaction, everything from the interaction with faculty to improving athletics, to improving the life on campus for students."

Robert J. Romano, 25, a senior from Rocky Point majoring in political science and active in the Undergraduate Student Government, praised his courses and professors, calling them "expert - very well versed." There could be more improvements in student life, though, he said, such as better advertisement of campus events.

Lawrence Brenner, 22, a senior from Ronkonkoma, criticized computer "technical glitches" affecting communication with students and registering for classes. Otherwise, Brenner praised the university's wealth of academic programs. "I've been learning Arabic."

Events in recent months signal that the university is as dynamic as might be expected in a young institution (its academic peers are all at least a century old). Stony Brook is expanding its territory and scope in a variety of ways, developments that Kenny said she never could have predicted but that mesh with the university's mission.

There's the university's role as co-manager of the Brookhaven National Laboratory; the acquisition of neighboring Gyrodyne property, through a controversial eminent domain move in November, to develop a research park; and its expected purchase of Southampton College from Long Island University, where environmental sustainability and arts curricula are planned to start this fall. Stony Brook already has taken over the college's undergraduate marine sciences program.

In 2002, the university also opened a small satellite campus in Manhattan to provide course offerings to the many students who live and work in the city, Kenny said, and to connect with alumni and donors.

Lindquist called these developments "opportunistic steps" that Kenny has moved quickly to take. "They presented themselves and Shirley went after them."

James Bouklas, 20, a junior from East Setauket who is editor in chief of the Stony Brook Statesman newspaper, said: "My personal view is she's doing a really good job." He called the Gyrodyne and the proposed Southampton expansions a "big feather in our cap to have these resources at our disposal." He said reporters from the student paper have gotten positive reactions about these acquisitions from other students.

John H. Marburger III, who preceded Kenny as Stony Brook president and is now director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, cited the management of the Brookhaven Lab as a "very major" development for the university. "Stony Brook didn't exist when Brookhaven Lab started," said Marburger, who once directed the lab himself, adding, "Mostly, Ivy League universities ran it."

Similarly, Kenny said it made sense for Stony Brook to annex 246 acres that once was owned by the Gyrodyne Co. It is where a Center of Excellence for Wireless Information Technology is to be established. Such moves have earned Kenny the reputation of a risk-taker.

Goodman, the sociology professor and a faculty senator, said, "She'll take a chance on something." He added, "I like her and I like most, not all, but most of the decisions she's made." He said, "Part of my disagreement with her, on occasion, is her lack of consultation with the faculty in advance of decisions some of the time."

Kenny acknowledges the criticism even if she also says, "I'm very respectful of faculty prerogatives and opinions" on academic issues.

Full speed ahead

So Kenny, who is 71, said she has no plans to retire from the position that pays her \$250,000 a year. Even as Stony Brook marks an important moment in its life as a university, there is quite a lot to do.

Among other things, she said she has been frustrated in her inability to hire many more full-time faculty, which many staff members say is crucial as student enrollment increases. Kenny said she would like more state support to finance this need and others.

Kenny said the Island's high cost of living can hurt recruiting efforts. "I have stories of people who don't accept our offer [when] they can go to other parts of the country where housing is so much cheaper."

Approaching her 12th anniversary in her all-consuming role, Kenny's high energy level marvels those who work with her. She amuses aides with her 2 a.m. e-mails about this or that. "I'm not finished with this job. Gyrodyne has to get off on the right track. Southampton has to get off on the right track. There are a lot of things that have to happen in the years coming up. A transition would not be good at this time."

"And, thank heavens, I'm in a phase of enormous building and development. Nothing could make me happier. It's a wonderful time to be at Stony Brook."

The Quiz

1. How many women have served as president of the university?
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 3
 - d. 5

2. On March 15, 1968, what was the subject of a demonstration held by hundreds of students?
 - a. Civil rights
 - b. Tuition increases
 - c. Mud on campus
 - d. The Vietnam War

3. Paul Lauterbur was honored with the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 2003 for his early work done while on the faculty on the development of what medical tool?
 - a. the fluoroscopic camera
 - b. the MRI machine
 - c. the EKG
 - d. the Lauterbur or "extended" clamp

4. The university originally convened classes on the site of what current state park?
 - a. Connetquot
 - b. Planting Fields
 - c. Bethpage
 - d. Belmont Lake

5. How many full- and part-time employees does the university have?
 - a. 3,400
 - b. 1,500
 - c. 13,500
 - d. 6,200

6. The university's sports teams are known as the "Seawolves. " What was the original name?
 - a. Warriors
 - b. Fighting Suburbanites

- c. Soundmen
- d. Patriots

7. How tall are the landmark towers of the University Hospital?

- a. 325 feet b. 250 feet
- c. 872 feet d. 670 feet

8. Name the university music program's quartet-in-residence.

- a. The Spirit of Mozart Quartet
- b. The Salzburg Strings
- c. The Emerson String Quartet
- d. The Melville Players

9. John Marburger was president of Stony Brook from 1980 to 1994. What prominent job did he eventually take after leaving?

- a. Director of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Pasadena, Calif.
- b. Science Adviser to President George W. Bush
- c. Scientist-in-Charge, Los Alamos National Laboratory
- d. President, Stanford University

10. The campus' \$22 million football stadium, opened in 2002, was named for what Long Island political figure?

- a. former U.S. Sen. Alfonse D'Amato
- b. President Theodore Roosevelt
- c. State Sen. Kenneth P. LaValle (R-Port Jefferson)
- d. former Suffolk County Executive H. Lee Dennison

11. Stony Brook's endowment has been cited as one of the nation's fastest-growing. What are its assets?

- a. \$1.2 billion
- b. \$243 million

c. \$63.8 million

d. \$575 million

Answers

1. a; 2. c; 3. b; 4. b; 5. c; 6. c; 7. a; 8. c; 9. b; 10. c; 11. c

Stony Brook's Student body

More than three-quarters of Stony Brook undergraduate students hail from the metropolitan area. While white students still make up the largest single bloc, the

university's diversity efforts can be seen in a large minority population.

WHERE THEY COME FROM

Suffolk

35%

New York City

34%

Nassau

14%

Other New York State

8%

International

5%

Other United States

4%

WHO THEY ARE

White

36%

Asian

22%

Unknown / other

19%

African origin

9%

Hispanic

9%

Other international

5%

14,287

Stony Brook undergraduate population as of fall 2005

SOURCE: STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY

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