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Outgoing Norton oversaw major turnaround at SRU

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SLIPPERY ROCK — After four years leading Slippery Rock University back from falling enrollment and financial instability, Cheryl Norton is unabashedly happy to be going home. Last week the university's 19th president announced her impending retirement, set for next summer.

On Thursday Norton, clad in black, knee-high riding boots and a red-tinted jacket, sat down in her Maltby Avenue office to talk about her time at SRU — calling the job her last as an administrator in higher education, and saying it has been both challenging and rewarding. Norton has been in education for four decades.

Two she spent as an educator in the classroom, before serving as provost of Metropolitan State College in Denver from 1997 to 2004, and then president of Southern Connecticut State University from 2004 to 2010, where she was the institution's first female president. After leaving Southern, Norton served as a senior fellow at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities in Washington, D.C.

In 2012, Norton emerged as SRU's top pick out of 11 candidates to succeed former President Robert Smith. Members of the committee charged with finding the institution's next leader said Norton's time at Southern, where she oversaw a \$260 million construction program that transformed that campus, as well as her work increasing enrollment to a record high of 12,000 students, made her stand out from the field.

Budget woes

Norton came into her SRU presidency with an eye for strategic planning and a nod to Pennsylvania's ongoing budget issues, which in 2011 saw state appropriations to the Pennsylvania System of Higher Education cut by 15 percent. At the time the university, like schools across the 14-institution system, was struggling mightily.

"We were in what I call the perfect financial storm," Norton said of the situation at that time.

In addition to lagging state appropriations, SRU was also facing multiple collective bargaining agreements that required retroactive payments and salary increases for employees.

Enrollment, which had peaked at 8,852 students in the 2010-11 year amid the nation's largest-ever class of high school graduates, had gone into a slide.

The university had operated with an \$8 million deficit in its \$156.4 million budget for the 2011-12 year, forcing it to eliminate 12 positions, modify 28 others, and cut \$5.6 million in nonpersonnel cuts, eliminating its Division of Lifelong Learning and its environmental education program.

"You had fewer tuition dollars, more cost, and no hope of state appropriates supplementing what you were doing," she said.

One of Norton's first acts as SRU's president was unlikely to endear her to anyone on campus: a 9 percent budget cut.

"That's a lousy way to start a presidency," Norton acknowledged, half-jokingly, last week.

At the time, the math didn't predict financial stability anytime soon. At her State of the University address on Sept. 12, 2013, Norton warned that financial models showed SRU's projected budget

deficit, at \$5.2 million, could grow to more than \$13 million by the 2015-16 year.

Turn around starts

Norton's budget cut could have presaged a slow decline at the university. Ultimately, though, it set the stage for a sprawling campus reinvestment program as well as expansions to the university's curriculum and course offerings that have seen SRU introduce 15 new degree programs, expand its graduate course offerings, and grow non-traditional programs, like online course offerings.

"That was an area that SRU was not only deficient in, but certainly didn't have a lot of energy toward what to do after that bachelor's degree," Norton said of continuing education. "So the development of a robust graduate program ... not just on-site but online ... I think that's where SRU has really developed and excelled."

Online learning in particular, which she said often appeals to nontraditional and female students in particular, was an area Norton knew could be an effective tool for growth.

While provost at Metropolitan State College in Denver she had helped oversee expanding online course availability from 179 students to 14,000.

At SRU Norton has overseen the institution of online pedagogy and processes education for faculty members. The school now also offers a master's degree in online teaching — something Norton sees as foundational for many education majors today.

"I think the question of whether online learning is effective is a thing of the past. We know it can be effective if done correctly," Norton said. "You don't go into online education because you want to dominate the world. You go into it because it's important for your students."

By September of 2014 the school had announced a stunning turnaround: a projected \$5.2 million deficit had turned into a \$262,135 surplus for the 2013-14 fiscal year. The school had also enrolled 2,200 new freshmen and transfer students — the largest freshman class in SRU history.

That year it was one of just three state system schools to announce an increase in annual enrollment.

That's a major point of pride for Norton, who noted that enrollment at SRU has grown each year since her first on the job — an effect she calls the product of a campuswide push to use data and evidence-based projections by faculty members to direct how new hires and curriculum development would occur.

"We are a public institution that exists for the good of the public. So our job was to survey the environment (and) say 'what is needed out there; where do we have the strengths; where are jobs available and (where) is student interest?'," Norton said.

Technology challenge

Institutional success notwithstanding, Norton says technology has, in many ways, become higher education's greatest challenge. It has transformed how classrooms work, but it's also producing high school graduates that have to be taught how to answer a phone and conduct a conversation at work-study jobs on campus — not to mention cheapening and sharpening public discourse in general.

"We were concerned in the '80s with the Sesame Street generation wanting instant gratification," Norton said. "But it's expanded past that. It's not just instant gratification, it's the entitlement to say and do what they want without recognizing their responsibility as a community member."

Changing times

This, in Norton's view, is how the jobs of educators and administrators in higher education have changed the most.

Back when she was in a classroom everyday things seemed more straightforward: a direct exchange of knowledge between teacher and student that could, theoretically at least, be measured by testing how well their knowledges matched what she knew.

Today, Norton said, higher education is seeing more students who are "broken and fragile" because of tumultuous lives at home; students who are faced with more ethical and moral tests at younger ages; and forms of communication — e-mail, text messages, Twitter, Facebook, etc. — that have cultivated privilege and entitlement with respect to public discourse and how people perceive

community responsibilities.

"What we've had to do in education is try not just to teach people about a discipline, but how to be a respectful human being in society: How to use your knowledge for good, and not just use it," she said.

The complexity of this sea-change has been both exacerbated and unmasked by everything from campus shootings — "there are no lessons that say to a president 'this is how you deal with an active shooter on campus,'" — to this year's presidential election, which Norton faulted for rhetoric that was "in many cases bullying."

"Our students see it and say 'why not? Apparently it's OK,'" Norton said. "So it's our position in education to try and help people develop as part of humanity in a respectful way."

The November election produced a variety of reactions on college campuses across America, from so-called "cry-ins" to announcements that some professors had canceled classes in deference to students upset with the results.

That hasn't happened at SRU, But Norton argues that the outcry against such reactions — Grove City College President Paul McNulty earlier this week lamented what he called a departure from traditional educational values — misses the point.

Norton argues that institutions are struggling, to varying degrees of success, with bringing their programs in-line with the real world. That's a messy task by nature, she said.

"I think we are past the stage of giving people an education based solely on what happens in the classroom. What we're really trying to do is develop individuals who can move out into a democratic culture and make a contribution," Norton said. "So we're no longer just trying to give you information. We're trying to help you formulate your character, and that's very different."

While Norton's great pride is leaving SRU better than she found it — financially stable and on the receiving end of a top-4 ranking among public universities in Pennsylvania, a top-150 ranking nationwide, and in the top 5 percent for "best value," — she's leaving with more work yet to do.

SRU's Future

"I think our next plan is truly, how do we continue to develop a focus in this institution on what is needed in Western Pennsylvania? How we continue to identify what comes next," she said.

That includes everything from what to do with 43 acres of undeveloped land near Slippery Rock's water tower — a parcel Norton sees as a prime home for a possible health care center — to upgrading general education, supporting liberal arts studies, growing international opportunities through study abroad and exchange programs, and capital improvement projects to improve student's quality of life.

The biggest of those projects is a performing arts center project that is "almost shovel ready," and expected to open in June of 2018, and a renovation of the SRU student union into an Academic Services and Success Center — a longer-range project Norton sees taking about 5 years to gather funding for.

Going home

By July of next year Norton won't be faced with that particular uncertainty any longer. She leaves SRU on June 30, 2017, and said she intends to move home to Colorado with her husband, Henry, into a home they haven't lived in for 13 years now.

"We're ready to kind of resume our life that we had in Colorado. But you never resume it in quite the same way," Norton said. "We're different. We've experienced a lot; it's been a wonderful journey."

For Norton, whose athletic pursuits have included everything from marathons and triathlons — where she has achieved national success in her age group — to racquetball, the future remains unclear. She's taking the advice of her brother-in-law, who told her not to rush into something just to stay busy.

"Let the ideas and opportunities rise to the top," he told her. "It will happen."

People shouldn't expect to see her name pop up at another college or university, though, Norton said. She said her plan has always been to retire as SRU's top administrator, and she intends to

stick to it.

"It's been a wonderful, wonderful place to spend time at," Norton said. "I hope people can say we made a difference in the life of this community. Certainly, one of the reasons I would never become a president anywhere else is (that) I can't think of a better place to be."

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