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Hackney, Sheldon: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1993): News Article 22

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PUSHING FOR PERFORMANCE AT PENN AFTER 8 YEARS, THE UNIVERSITY'S PRESIDENT EARNs CREDIT

PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER (PI) - THURSDAY February 9, 1989

By: Huntly Collins, Inquirer Staff Writer

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TEXT:

Sheldon Hackney, the president of the University of Pennsylvania, peered over his reading glasses at the 20 students gathered in the elegant living room of Eisenlohr, the president's mansion on the Penn campus.

"It has come to my attention that the reading for next week is exceedingly long. I'm sorry about that. Do it anyway."

With that, Hackney was off and running with his fast-paced seminar on the history of the 1960s, which he teaches in front of his marble fireplace every Tuesday night.

A Southern historian and former president of Tulane University, Hackney, 56, has managed to find time to teach ever since he assumed the Penn presidency in 1981. It's his way, he said, of staying in touch with his academic discipline - and with Penn's mission in undergraduate teaching.

"What we see ourselves being is the leading comprehensive research university that really cares about undergraduate education," Hackney said during a recent interview.

A tall man with Abe Lincoln looks and Southern charm, Hackney, a native of Birmingham, Ala., was cast in the role of the unwanted outsider when he first landed on the 20,000-student Penn campus.

While holding nothing against Hackney, Penn faculty members were up in arms about the trustees' failure to tap Vartan Gregorian, then Penn's popular provost, as the university's next president, replacing Martin Meyerson, who resigned after a turbulent decade.

"I would say to myself, 'It's not about me. It's about the situation,' " Hackney recalled. "I made a rather conscious decision not to pay attention to it."

Today, the uproar over Gregorian, who went on to head the New York Public Library and is about to assume the presidency of Brown University, has largely died out.

While Hackney still has detractors among the Penn faculty, he has begun to win accolades from many inside and outside the university for launching what appears to be a highly successful drive to raise \$800 million, half of it to enhance undergraduate programs, in the next five years.

Though the campaign's official start is not until fall, Penn has raised more than \$221 million toward its goal.

The gifts include \$6.25 million from stockbroker George Weiss, \$10 million from Revlon Co. chairman Ronald O. Perelman and \$25 million from

insurance magnate Saul S. Steinberg, the largest single donation in the university's 249-year history.

Hackney also is credited with completing Penn's transformation into a residential campus, improving its relations with the West Philadelphia community, and putting a new spotlight on undergraduate education.

"The university, in my opinion, is on the verge of breaking through to a higher plateau," said Alvin V. Shoemaker, former chairman of the First Boston Corp. and head of the Penn board of trustees.

As Penn president, Hackney oversees a \$1.1 billion annual budget, a 17,000 member workforce and 12 schools within the university, each with an agenda.

It is an assignment that Hackney has approached the way he approaches his history class - as an exercise in civil discourse that encourages different points of view. "It's a particular style that has worked for Penn," he said.

Many administrators in the Penn community appreciate Hackney's management style.

"He really sets high standards and projects a vision that the university can do great things," said Marvin Lazerson, dean of Penn's Graduate School of Education, whom the Hackney administration recruited from Harvard 18 months ago. "But he expects you to find your own way of achieving excellence. He genuinely wants people to come to their own conclusions."

Some faculty leaders, however, say Hackney's low-key approach has left the university without vision and leadership. "Sheldon is doing a perfectly good job, but a leader he is not," said one faculty member, who asked not to be identified. "I don't see the big initiatives."

But the professor added: "It may be that, in the end, we are misjudging Hackney. He is bringing in a lot of money."

Hackney, the first Penn president to require schools to develop five-year plans, bristles at the suggestion that he lacks a vision for the university. He noted that Penn's long-range plans emphasize interdisciplinary research and undergraduate teaching.

As for the contention that he is low-profile, Hackney says, he is striving to heighten his image, both locally and nationally. However, he says, he refuses to become the kind of one-man show run by academic leaders such as John Silber, the iron-willed president of Boston University.

"If that's the other model, I feel quite comfortable with the way I have approached the job," he said.

Under Hackney's leadership, Penn, which was a commuter school as late as the 1950s, has been able to boost itself as a residential campus. Last year, the university finished a \$35 million renovation of the historic Quad, which houses freshmen, and a major effort is under way to step up social and educational programs in residence halls.

Hackney, who lives at Eisenlohr with his wife, Lucy, a lawyer, is the first Penn president to reside on the campus. "We wanted to say symbolically that this is a residential university," he said.

He also has worked hard to improve relations with Penn's West Philadelphia neighbors, who have often been at odds with the university's expansion into residential areas.

Hackney is chairman of the West Philadelphia Partnership, a consortium of groups that seeks to revitalize residential and economic life in the area. Among the programs it oversees is a nationally touted work-study program in the local public schools.

"Sheldon Hackney has put the University of Pennsylvania on the map as a leading citizen of West Philadelphia," said Bernard Anderson, an economist and managing partner of the Urban Affairs Partnership, a local civic group.

Said Joseph Neubauer, the chief executive officer of ARA Services Inc., who has worked with Hackney on community activities: "For a long time, Penn had a tradition of being aloof and elitist. If one leads by personal example, Sheldon is certainly working at changing that."

Long noted for its graduate programs and professional schools, Penn also has put a new emphasis on undergraduate education during Hackney's tenure as president.

Last year, the School of Arts and Sciences, which enrolls the bulk of the university's undergraduates, adopted a major revision of its curricular requirements to ensure that students receive a broad liberal arts education rather than specializing too narrowly.

The school also has attracted prominent scholars, such as Mary Frances Berry, a member of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, who has joined the history department.

The school is at the center of the university's big fund-raising campaign. Of the \$25 million donated by Steinberg, for instance, \$10 million was earmarked for the English department, an almost-unheard-of gift for a program in the humanities.

According to a poll of college officials published last year by U.S. News & World Report, Penn's undergraduate program ranked 15th in the country, well ahead of many other prestigious schools but at the bottom of the Ivy League.

Hackney said the pollsters' perception of Penn had not caught up with the reality. "In undergraduate education, we have been moving up very fast. That has not yet registered," he said.

One leading indicator, he said, was the university's increasing popularity among undergraduates. In 1980, Penn had about 11,300 applications for 2,000 spots in its freshman class. By 1988, the figure had risen to 13,100, the highest ever.

Like many other schools in the Ivy League, applications are down this year, but Penn remains a more attractive school for high school seniors than it was when Hackney arrived.

"I attribute that to our strengthening of academic programs, improvements in the social climate for students and the renaissance going on in Philadelphia as a place to live," Hackney said.

As he looks to the future, Hackney faces a number of important challenges. One is nursing Penn's world-class teaching hospital, which has

run-up losses of \$14.1 million in the last two years, back to fiscal health. This year, the hospital is expected to break even and start an upswing, Hackney said.

At the undergraduate level, Penn also is striving to improve the graduation rate among its black and Hispanic students, who make up 11.6 percent of the undergraduates, and boost the number of city high school students who are academically able to attend Penn.

Hackney - who said he decided last year to stay on as Penn president for probably five more years while the fund-raising campaign is under way - is upbeat about tackling these and other tasks ahead of him. "There are still new things I want to try," he said.

CAPTION:

PHOTO (2), 1. Sheldon Hackney; Governs with a "particular style", 2. Penn President Sheldon Hackney (center), teaching at home. (The Philadelphia Inquirer / MICHAEL S. WIRTZ)

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