



Morning runs give Tufts University President Larry Bacow the chance for informal interaction with students.



By Alana Klein

TODAY, MANY COLLEGE PRESIDENTS ARE FINDING NOVEL WAYS TO CONNECT WITH STUDENTS.



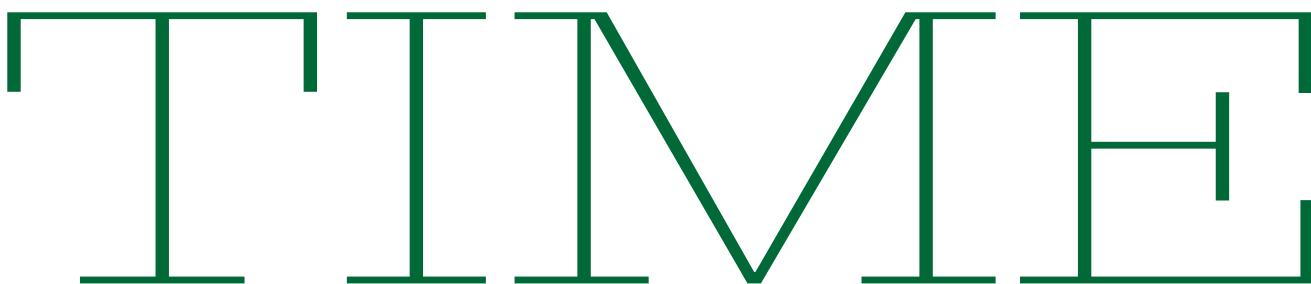
College and university presidents are certainly tied up these days. Between fundraising, business meetings, and schmoozing with donors, there is little time left for other things, particularly getting to know their students. For many of these “phantom” college presidents, the demands of the job only allow for minimal interaction with students, like the proverbial handshake at commencement.

But, there is great value in being accessible. It creates a more personalized college experience for students, which, in turn, encourages them to become more involved on campus and as alumni. The president also benefits—what better respite from the arduous, intense job of president than hanging out with vibrant, energetic students?

University Business spoke to a handful of college presidents who, despite their busy schedules, have reached out to students. Through athletics, music, food, or just “hanging out,” a new wave of presidents are proving that they are more than just silver-tongued, Ph.D.-bearing fundraising experts, but regular Joes and Janes who possess a genuine interest in getting to know their students.

A Running Relationship

Tufts University (Mass.) President Larry Bacow is a perfect example. Often clad in a T-shirt and running shorts, the three-time marathon runner invites students to train for and run the Boston Marathon with him. This tradition, called the President’s Marathon Challenge, began in 2003 and continued this year. Bacow says there are many benefits to the challenge. First, it gets him out running early in the morning. “If I didn’t have these students knock-





FACE TIME

Preparing meals and dining with students, St. Anselm College (N.H.) President Jonathan De Felice has found, provides nourishment for the body, heart, and soul.



Travel abroad takes on new meaning for students at Salisbury University (Md.), who can count on President Janet Dudley-Eshbach being by their side.

ing at my door at 6:15 a.m., I wouldn't be running," he says. Then there's the undeniable camaraderie that develops on training runs. "When we're on a run, we're all just runners. There are no barriers," he says. "It's very informal, unlike an office or lunch interaction with a student when I'm in my jacket and tie. That can be intimidating to a student."

In addition, Bacow and the students race for a worthy cause, which is to support research being done at Tufts on fitness, nutrition, and obesity. He and the other Tufts-affiliated race participants, including alumni, raised about \$350,000 each time, and the university initiative has generated a total of \$10 million more in corporate donations. "It's a great way to give back to the university and to support a program that encourages students to lead a healthy lifestyle," he says.

Even students who aren't runners get involved in the marathon preparation. Bacow says some 350 volunteers from Tufts, including students, faculty, and staff, manned the water stations at last year's marathon. It is even mentioned in the campus tour for prospective freshman. As the group passes by the president's house, the guide notes, "If you're interested, you can run with the president."

While the tradition may not be the university's most important recruitment tool, the presidential run has created good will among

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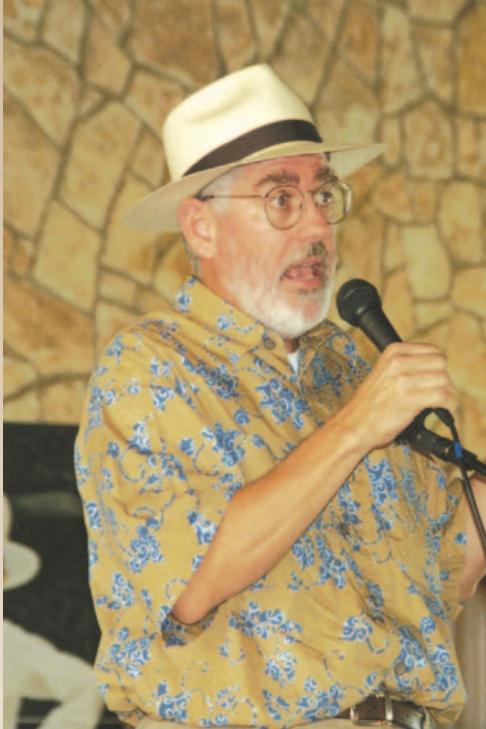
students and their parents. Even Bacow's wife, Adele, has proved her running prowess. She takes parents on a two-and-a-half mile loop during parents weekend, which is followed by a bagels and coffee get-together at the president's home.

The Way to the Heart Is Through the Stomach

Jonathan DeFelice, president at **St. Anselm College** (N.H.), bonds with students through his gourmet Italian cooking. "I come from an Italian-American family where meals were part of our daily life," he says. "We ate when we were sad or upset with each other and we ate when we were happy." DeFelice cooks meals at students' apartments a few times a year and eats with students in the dining room several times a week. He even inspired one group of male students to cook a meal for him in their apartment. His specialties include timballo (a pasta casserole with a meatball crust) and pasta alla norcina (pasta with sausage and peas).

DeFelice describes the act of eating together as a way into the human heart and soul. "With students so overscheduled and over-committed, it's rare that they can sit around the table and talk for an extended period of time," he says. "This wasn't the case when I was growing up. Meals were very important. So, there's something very restorative about doing this."

Furthermore, he feels it is important to teach students that food preparation and eating are "not just nourishment of the body, but nourishment of spirit. It's about working with one another to get a meal together and then enjoying their company." Even alumni have heard about DeFelice's skills in the kitchen. He has prepared



Yodeling during open mic hour at a coffee house is how Schreiner University's Tim Summerlin has been known to spend his time.



At regular president luncheons, Susquehanna University (Pa.) students are asked to share what they would change about the school if they were president. Their candor is appreciated by man-in-charge Jay Lemons, who invites every student to a lunch at some point.

"The student lunches are a reminder for me of why I am here, what I am trying to do, and who I am trying to serve."

—President Jay Lemons, Susquehanna University (Pa.)

Italian dinners for alumni in South Beach, Fla., and Chicago.

The Lunch Club

Eating with the president is also commonplace at **Susquehanna University** (Pa.), where President Jay Lemons invites each student to join him for lunch at some point during his or her college career. Every invitation comes with a request that the students be prepared to talk about three things: why they chose Susquehanna, what they have enjoyed most, and what they would change if they were president. Lemons, who claims to know every student by face, if not by name, purposely invites groups of students (and often of mixed classes) who don't know each other. "Any number of revelations comes from these lunches. Students are very candid about their likes and dislikes," he says. As a result, programs have been enhanced and initiatives created. For example, student complaints about the after-hours social life prompted plans to convert a current storage facility on the campus perimeter into a social space, as well as the hiring of a director of campus activities.

These lunches have also benefited Lemons on a personal level by keeping student interaction a priority on the job. "It fills a void. ... I was drawn to serve in higher ed because of the satisfaction I found in working with college-age students," he says. "Yet, the

nature of the job is so externally focused that there is a time constraint. I knew that if I didn't make it a priority in my schedule to meet with students, I would be limited to seeing them in passing." Furthermore, he says, "These lunches are a reminder for me of why I am here, what I am trying to do, and who I am trying to serve." While not all 1,930 students take him up on his lunch offer, he says he has already lunched with more than 200 students this year.

Studying Abroad with the President

Janet Dudley-Eshbach, president of **Salisbury University** (Md.), is one of the few presidents who will accompany students on their travel abroad experiences. Sharing her love of foreign travel and learning languages, Dudley-Eshbach has traveled to Ecuador and Puerto Rico with students on winter and spring breaks. "I thought it would be a good experience for me to see first-hand what students are going through and what the program is really like," she says. "Besides, when you sit side by side with them and speak Spanish in a small village in Ecuador, they begin to see the college administration in a different light." From ruins and rainforests to live music venues at night, Dudley-Eshbach is up for any excursion with students.

A proponent of foreign study, Dudley-Eshbach has made it one of the hallmarks of the institution. "When I got here, it wasn't a big part of what we were doing. I was concerned that our campus was a bit isolated, knowing how the world is getting smaller with each passing year. That is why I have been actively promoting the internationalization of our campus," she says.

Dudley-Eshbach, who also teaches conversational Spanish ▶

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Truly connecting with students means viewing prospective freshmen as part of the campus community, too. Bill Robinson, president of Whitworth College (Wash.), makes a point to write a personal note on every applicant's acceptance letter.



every other semester, says, "The goal is to get students to discover that they have a lot more in common with people of other cultures than they might think."

Yodel-ay-hee-hoo

Tim Summerlin, **Schreiner University's** (Texas) president of six years, connects with students through his love of music—from singing to yodeling. He created Schreiner's first choral program and music major, both of which he feels are essential to "connecting even non-music majors to the institution." The choir started out with 15 students; now there are 35. Because they were short on male singers at first, Summerlin sang with the choir and still does on occasion, like last January when the choir went to New York City to sing in Carnegie Hall.

"The funny thing is I don't have a strong musical background. I don't even play an instrument," Summerlin confides. "But I truly feel that music brings people together."

Summerlin is most famous for his yodeling skills, which he often displays during the open mic hour at a local coffee house. A student guitarist will accompany him while he yodels to blues music. Asserting his modesty once again, he says, "I am no great yodeler, but it gives the performance a nice cadenza."

He is confident that his immersion into student life is building student connections. "We want students who graduate to look back and say, 'Wow, something happened to me at Schreiner that was awfully important. I improved as a person and I want to give back and improve the institution.'"

Personalizing the Admissions Process

President of **Whitworth College** (Wash.) Bill Robinson makes an impression on incoming freshman early in the game, writing a personal note on each student's acceptance letter. His admissions staff leaves Post-It notes on student files describing a few of their interests so Robinson can personalize his notes. If a student

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—President Bill Robinson, Whitworth College (Wash.)

mentioned an interest in playing the French horn, Robinson might write: "I look forward to hearing you on stage," he says. He has been writing such notes for the last eight or nine years of his 12-year presidency. "The reason I do it is that I want them to get a taste of what they can expect at Whitworth, which is a different kind of student attention that they wouldn't get elsewhere."

He speaks about the large gap that exists between faculty, staff, and students. "Higher education can be pretentious. We call ourselves doctors and we create this symbolic distance between our students and ourselves. If we don't take initiative to bridge that gap, we will just further the distance between us and them."

To lessen the distance, Robinson takes an informal, laid-back approach to his presidency. For example, once he saw a student running laps around the track and decided it would be fun to join her. "I found out that her parents were separating and that it was a difficult time for her at home. I was able to be an adult figure of support for her," he says. To this day, he still asks about her family.

Clearly, college presidents serve many roles. But their most important priority, says Dudley-Eshbach, is to "put students first. I know that many faculty don't like the idea that students are our clients. But they are. So we put them at the center of everything we do," she says. While not every college president can be expected to run a marathon, yodel, or travel to Ecuador with students, making a little time for them goes a long way. **U**