



President Barry M. Maloney Reflects on 10 Years at Worcester State

SOMETIMES, a lengthy pause reveals more than any words could. It came when Worcester State University President Barry M. Maloney was asked, “What is the biggest challenge you’ve faced in your 10 years as president of Worcester State University?” Identifying a challenge was, well, challenging for him.

Not even a worldwide pandemic seems to have fazed him. His reassuring presence may have played a role in attracting hundreds to weekly “COVID TV,” as some nicknamed the Zoom sessions offered to employees and students between March 2020 and the end of the Spring 2021 semester. That calming, baritone voice may have been just as important to hear as the updates on campus protocols and infection rates. It’s reflective of the “steady, competent leadership” Maloney brings to the campus, as Board of Trustees Chair Stephen Madaus puts it.

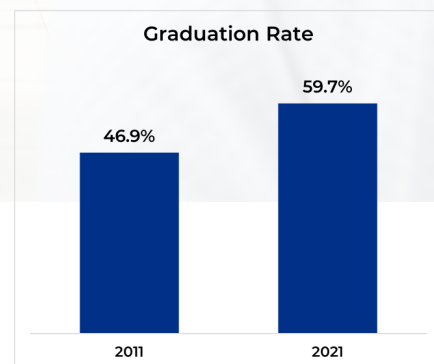
In July of 2011, the then 44-year-old Maloney began leading Worcester State University with an ease that belied his youth and what some perceived as a non-traditional background, having come up through the staff, rather than faculty, ranks. Maloney began in residence life at Westfield State University in his 20s, and quickly ascended the ranks. Having served as vice president of two different areas, and then twice as interim president, he was well-prepared for the permanent role at Worcester State.

Confident, yes. Arrogant or self-important? Not so much. As former Worcester State Foundation Board Chair Mary Ritter puts it, “He is smart but self-deprecating, articulate but informal, and focused, but also caring.”

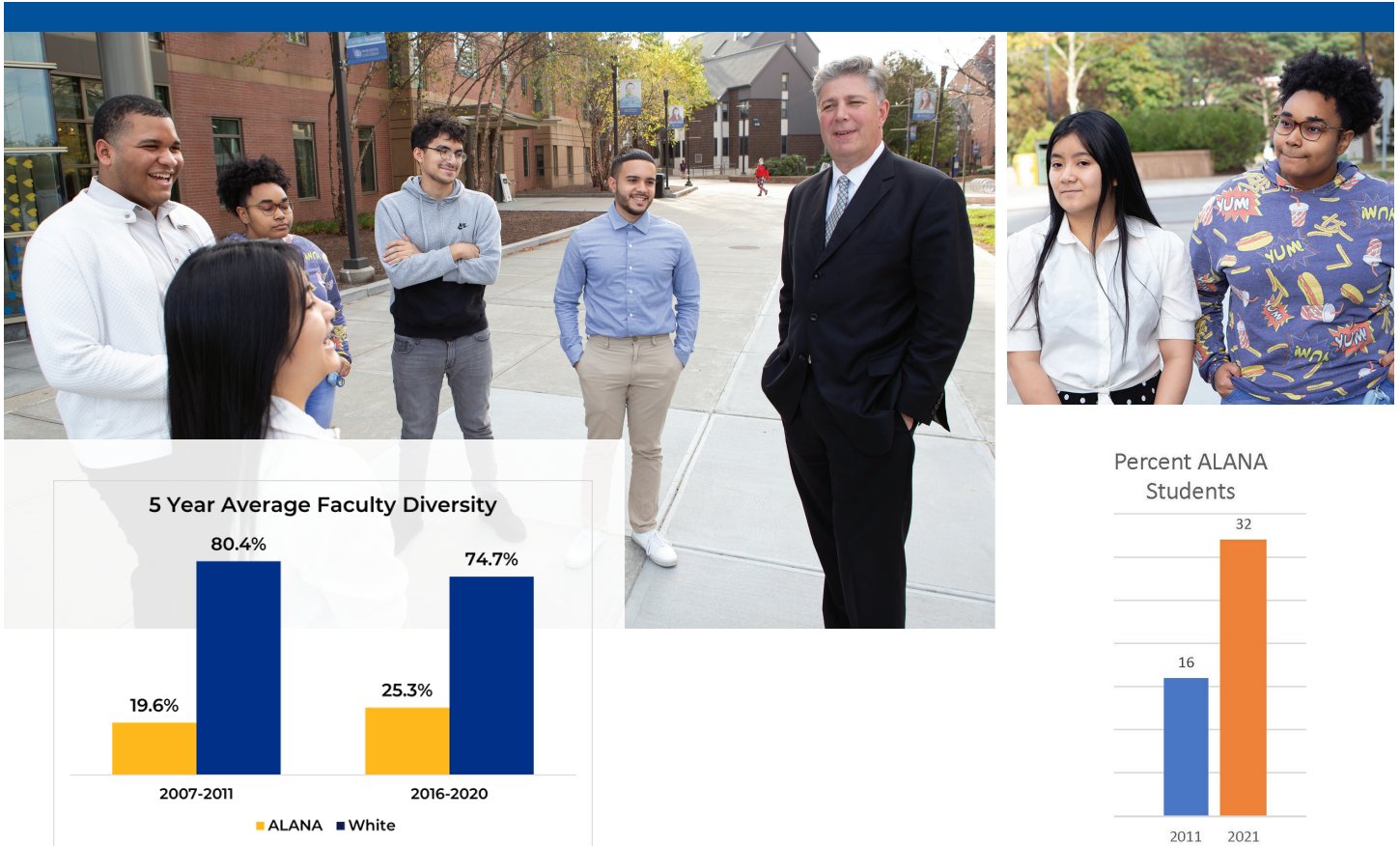
While few challenges leapt to mind, there were some surprises for Maloney upon his arrival. The two WSUs, it turned out, were not as similar as their shared acronyms would suggest. “We had a strong commuter set of attitudes here,” he says, and a “transactional nature,” which, for employees, meant that non-work hours were mostly spent off campus, rather than, say, on the university basketball court with colleagues. Another difference was just how highly regarded Worcester State is in the greater Worcester community, with a deep, strong alumni base. An alumnus leaf or two in, seemingly, every family tree has led to consistently strong fundraising.

Overall, the transition was not difficult. Yet Maloney says the move from Westfield to the Worcester State president’s house was disruptive for his family of five. “My wife, Laura, was on the school committee, my kids were all in school, they had their friends. Carden [his oldest daughter, now in graduate school] was in sixth grade.”

Some had counseled him to commute from Westfield. The Maloneys decided otherwise. The significance of that move was not lost on Ritter. “He and Laura fully embraced all things WSU and Worcester related,” she says.



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Building a Team

A first order of business for any new chief executive is “to get people all rowing in the same direction,” says Maloney, which starts with those who run each division. He had inherited the executive leadership team of his predecessor, “every one of them a good person,” says Maloney, but some changes were necessary. He added two key positions to the group, reconfigured the human resources area, which attracted community-and-higher-education leader Stacey Luster, J.D., to WSU, and reorganized two divisions, bringing Vice President Ryan Forsythe, Ed.D., and elevating Julie Kazarian ’98, M.S. ’01 into the re-named “Direct Reports” group (now called Executive Cabinet).

Since mid 2015, when Provost Lois Wims, Ph.D., was brought on, that senior team has remained stable. Two others have been added, but there have been no subtractions. When asked recently by Department of Higher Education Commissioner Carlos E. Santiago why Worcester State has done so well over the past several years, Maloney cited that continuity.

Why have those who report to him stayed? Luster calls Maloney “a rare combination of innovative, thoughtful, respectful, and bold.” Provost Wims, whose seven-year tenure significantly exceeds the chief academic officer average of 4.7 years, says, “His sense of humor and relatively rapid pivots to

optimism even in murky situations make him a joy to work with.” Stability is a factor for Maloney himself, whose 10-year incumbency is double the five-year average for presidents of public, primarily undergraduate institutions (American Council on Education report, 2017).

Putting Students First

By Maloney’s September 2012 inauguration, he had determined that “students first” could unite the campus around a positive vision. He set about improving international and community engagement opportunities for students, establishing direct lines of communication, and ramping up an effort begun under the previous administration to improve the graduation rate. The 2020 student trustee, Manuel Reyes-Ponce ’21, says, “President Maloney was always looking for opportunities to engage with the student body in whatever capacity he could, and I know the students always appreciated him taking the time out of his busy schedule to share the moment with them.”

At Maloney’s five-year mark, that work was assessed in a report that showed progress on student success measures, academic excellence, private support, and campus management—all in service to students. Chair of the Board of Trustees at that time, the late Ronald Valerio ’75, said, “The WSU of 2016 is not the same campus President Maloney inherited...Everyone expects more from themselves and each other.”



Student-Focused Buildings and Fundraising

Upon his arrival, Maloney was charged with overseeing the completion of a 10-year, \$200 million physical transformation of the Worcester State campus—a task that seemed tailor-made to leverage his experience in fundraising and government relations. As Board Chair Madaus says, “President Maloney is as comfortable and capable engaging with an alumni group, as he is dealing with students and faculty, as he is lobbying members of the state legislature.”

Along with key members of his Direct Reports group, Maloney ensured that state officials followed through on funding commitments for the Lt. Col. James F. Sheehan ’55 Residence Hall and for the \$53 million Wellness Center. Securing supplemental private funds was also necessary. Board of Trustees members and Worcester State Foundation Chair Craig Bovaird ’77 assisted, as the government and private pieces came together.

By 2014, the campus had renovated every existing building except for the gym, which was demolished to make way for that capstone project. At the Wellness Center’s groundbreaking, then-Governor Deval Patrick said that the building “represents a powerful commitment to our students, our economy, and the region.” The same could be said of the entire 10-year rebuilding plan.

Between renovations to existing residence halls and the two new ones (Wasylean and Sheehan), the percentage of undergraduate students living on campus nearly doubled over the 10 years. Students benefited from a new, signature dining hall capable of feeding all residents, commuters, and employees, and a fitness center and recreational spaces that the 1954 gym building simply had no room for.

Maloney’s fundraising prowess helped the University secure four seven-figure gifts over that period, including the single largest (\$3.5 million) gift in its history, as well as complete the largest fundraising campaign in the University’s history. Fundraising doubled and endowment growth tripled during the Maloney presidency.

Maloney spearheaded retention efforts that resulted in a graduation rate gain that was recognized in 2014 as one of the best in the state by the Department of Higher Education. New buildings and associated programming, like recreational sports, were keeping students engaged on campus. A new emphasis on leadership development, as reflected in a 2020 Student

Affairs reorganization, also improved students’ collegiate experience.

What about the experience inside the classrooms? A hallmark of a Worcester State education is the personal attention students receive from full-time faculty members. Worcester State hired 77 new tenure-track faculty in Maloney’s first five years. Seventeen of those were new positions, and nearly all held terminal degrees. “He’s fostered opportunities for faculty and students to shine, as with undergraduate research and study abroad,” says Provost Wims. “Another example is the recent creation of the Office of Grants and Sponsored Research, which reflects a commitment to faculty research.”

Eyes on the Future

“I’m not going to sugar coat it,” says Maloney. “My first impression of Worcester State was that it was not such a friendly place.” A consultant’s review indicated that the campus lacked a customer-service orientation, and students suffered because of it.

Maloney felt there was a need to address this issue and to keep employees focused on the future, rather than the recent past—a period where a departmental oversight failure was identified publicly and there had been a suicide on campus. A way to do that? Create a set of shared expectations, via a comprehensive, inclusive strategic planning process. “We developed the first comprehensive strategic plan and established an expectation that it would be implemented,” he says.

The 2015-2020 Strategic Plan was a blueprint for the future and a campus unifier. During its development phase, sometimes warring factions were placed in the same room together to hash out priorities. When the plan reached its final draft, Maloney told faculty and staff it held “strategic implications for Worcester State’s future and [had the] potential to focus and unite us as a community of learning.”

Other plans have followed—most notably the Roadmap for Advancing Student Excellence (RASE) Plan, a way to shift the university’s academic programming in order to attract students well into the future and provide them a competitive edge in the marketplace once they graduate. With the pandemic potentially accelerating the enrollment decline, having this plan in place seems not only “planful”—a quintessential Maloney word—but also prescient.



President Maloney founded the Presidential Student Ambassador (PSA) program in 2012. The students are called on to promote the University at select on- and off-campus functions throughout the academic year. The photo at left shows the PSA group in 2016. The photo on right shows Maloney with students on Residence Hall Move-In Day 2019.

Pandemic Times

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020, the campus had a well-oiled process for developing inclusive plans and a solid, collaborative senior administrative team in place. Students had been attracted to Worcester State in large part for in-person experiences and interactions with faculty who care about them. This model was completely upended by the pandemic.

Reyes-Ponce '21, who was student trustee at that time, believes the speed with which Worcester State pivoted to fully remote learning was Maloney's most significant accomplishment in his 10 years. "As the world entered a new level of uncertainty, President Maloney and the University made it a priority to keep faculty, staff, and its students safe, and accomplished that rapid transition," he says.

Maloney confidently turned to his Executive Cabinet, charging them with immediately locking down the University, while staying fully open so that students could continue learning on an uninterrupted path toward graduation. Under Provost Wims' leadership, all students and faculty who were overseas came home, within weeks, the IT department got laptops into the hands of students and employees, and the faculty pivoted to all-remote learning. The Student Affairs Division, which primarily serves on-campus students, transformed itself into a public health operation, establishing a COVID-19 testing center with isolation, quarantine, and contact tracing operations.

"President Maloney adjusts to whatever has to get done. At the top of that list, the entire last 10 years, is COVID," says Board Chair Madaus.

A More Inclusive Campus Climate

There are things that remain to be done. Maloney often uses the words "problem-solving," which reflects his can-do approach, and he extends it to the topic of improving inclusivity on campus.

Although no prominent incidents had occurred on campus, in early 2016, Maloney launched "Five Points of Action toward a More Inclusive Campus Climate." Since then, the University has established the Campus Climate Committee and the Bias Incident Report Team, which join the University's Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in protecting against discrimination and in carrying out programming that brings people of diverse backgrounds across campus together. Maloney also spearheaded changes in the hiring process in a way that was internally controversial yet effective (see ALANA Faculty Growth graphic). These efforts no doubt led Higher Education Commissioner Santiago to appoint Maloney to his statewide Equity Advisory Board in 2019.

The Future

"The challenges around that DEI work are real," says Maloney, adding the "J" for justice. "I think those will be important conversations for the University to have over the next 10 years, or more."

Enrollment and graduate outcomes will demand sustained attention, and Maloney says supporting faculty is also a priority. "We've got to think of ways to bring new resources to bear. New faculty come in with expectations, they want to thrive, they want to do things differently. That's a challenge most public institutions have, and it's one I'm excited to tackle in the years ahead."

And the daily motivator continues to be connecting with students. "It's one of the most enjoyable aspects of the job," he says, "No doubt about it."