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Wagner's turnaround elicits accolades

It's good news!

By DON GROSS
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Wagner College has accomplished a turnaround that appears to be nothing short of miraculous by putting the problems it faced just two years ago in its past, according to faculty and staff at the 107-year-old college.

Interviews with almost a dozen members of the college community reveal a new spirit on the Grymes Hill campus that matches a new look.

This contrasts sharply with both the mood and appearance of the college at the close of the 1987-88 academic year.

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"I've been here for almost 20 years and I've never seen so many changes take place in so short a period of time," said Dr. Walter Kaelber, chairman of the Humanities Department.

All those interviewed cited the appointment of Dr. Norman Smith as president of the college in May 1988 as the moving force behind the changes.

The most visible change to people passing by Wagner at night is the architectural lighting that enhances the campus's picturesque qualities. Main Hall is bathed in white light and so are the trees surrounding it.

"People come up here to the theater (in Main Hall) and actually come early so they have time to walk around the campus," Kaelber said.

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Wagner College president Dr. Norman Smith speaks during a board of trustees meeting last Tuesday in the Student Union. Dr. Donald Spiro, left, and Kevin Sheehy also are pictured.

ADVANCE PHOTO: FRANK J. JOHNS

Two years ago, he said, that didn't happen. While crowds have always been drawn to plays put on by the college's renowned theater department, conditions at the school two years ago reflected almost a decade of financial strain and poor morale.

"I was ready to leave," said Richard DiRuzza, vice president for academic affairs. What was driving him away, he said, was the factional infighting among supporters of the previous administration and those who wanted immediate change.

He wasn't alone. Others said they, too, were ready to walk away from Wagner — enough to have decimated the faculty and perhaps crippled the school.

Gary Sullivan, chairman of the theater department, said Smith's appointment changed many minds.

"He has an open style of leadership," he said. "If you have an idea you can go and talk to him."

Smith also came to the school with an amount of energy never before seen on the campus.

"No president ever paid attention to the maintenance staff before and I've been here 22 years," supervisor Dominick Fontano said.

But at the same time, he said Smith conveyed an enthusiasm that drove the men to take pride in the college themselves.

Student furniture in the dorms, including beds, would fall apart before it was replaced, he said. "We'd look at it and figure it can go another two or three years. Now it goes when it starts to look worn."

Everything, according to the interview subjects, has been done with the convenience of the students in mind.

Registrar Mildred Nelson said a new computer system has put an end to the process that kept students shuffling from room to

room and spending hours in line in order to register for classes and pay their tuition.

"Now they can get it done without standing on any lines," she said.

Also in the works is an expansion of the faculty. Eight new professors were hired last year and a search is being conducted for 10 more.

The aim, according to Dr. Anne Schotter, an English professor, is to add new courses and new material.

The combined effect has already had an impact. While most small, private colleges suffered a nearly 20 percent decline in the number of applications in the last few years, Wagner recently reported applications are up 30 percent. More significantly, the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores of the applicants were up by an average of 100 points, according to Dr. Ronald Lee, the school's director of corporate and foundation grants.

Lee uses figures like this to help obtain corporate and private foundation grants needed to move the school forward. Just the physical changes were enough to im-

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press foundation representatives.

More important, he said, has been the school's improved financial health. Wagner went from a massive deficit to a small surplus within a year. Where once organizations such as the Clark and Calder foundations had put Wagner on a list of schools to avoid, the Grymes Hill school was again acceptable and receiving some of the largest grants given — \$250,000 from the Calder and \$100,000 from the Clark.

The progress has given the college community hope it never thought it would have about the school, faculty and staff members said.

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DiRuzza agreed. "It's nice to be on a winning team," he said.