

Floyd: Winthrop's DiGiorgio leaves impressive legacy

Published: March 21, 2013



By DALTON FLOYD — Guest Columnist

Columbia, SC — South Carolina soon will mark the retirement of one of the longest-serving public university presidents in the United States: Anthony J. DiGiorgio will retire from Winthrop University's presidency after 24 years.

Palmetto State residents who know 21st century Winthrop recognize the transformation that Dr. DiGiorgio's leadership has created: a modern curriculum centered around building capacities needed for lifelong professional achievement and civic leadership, a technologically contemporary academic environment and intertwined strategies for campus growth and economic development.

What may be less well-known, yet noteworthy, are the contributions that President DiGiorgio has made to his adopted state. Consider:

- **Diversity.** Winthrop University has become an institution of choice for the best and brightest college-eligible African-American students. Winthrop is more successful at guiding those students to degree attainment than most American colleges, and was nationally recognized in 2010 for that achievement by the Education Trust and the Gates Foundation.

Achievement in diversity began in 1989-90, when DiGiorgio, who had moved south from New Jersey, decided to visit African-American churches and high schools with high minority enrollments. The focus of that outreach was to deliver one important message: African-American students will find a welcoming, supportive campus at Winthrop.

Back then, Winthrop's minority enrollment was just 14 percent. Today, it is 29 percent. Now, word of mouth among successful African-American students and alums makes Winthrop a first choice.

- **Collaboration.** As former chairman of the S.C. Commission on Higher Education, I know how difficult it has been to motivate the higher-education community to coordinate activities focused on statewide needs. Only in two instances have such initiatives been undertaken — both during DiGiorgio terms as chair of the Council of Presidents. Sadly, neither initiative could sustain traction under leadership other than his.

Given new pressures pummeling higher education — e.g., unproven massive on-line courses that tickle politicians' fantasies of a \$10,000-a-year college degree — it remains to be seen whether S.C. higher education can recover from the Great Recession without such a champion.

- **Service.** Public service has been a core value at Winthrop since its founding, and now manifests itself statewide in several ways.

A few years back, President DiGiorgio welcomed to campus the S.C. headquarters of Campus Compact — the national organization of more than 1,200 institutions that work to develop students' citizenship capacities through public and community service. Now, not coincidentally, a generation of young leaders is taking its place in civic and public policy roles because of habits of service cultivated by Campus Compact and supported by the personal examples DiGiorgio set.

Winthrop years ago welcomed to its campus the state offices of what is now the S.C. Center for Teacher Recruitment, Retention and Advancement. The center and Winthrop are known for encouraging national standards among teachers and helping ensure a pipeline of quality K-12 teachers for our state.

Likewise, Winthrop hosts the Arts in Basic Curriculum project, which provides statewide leadership in delivering arts education to K-12 students to build the creativity and innovation they will need later in virtually all professional fields.

Winthrop also was at the vanguard of campus safety, long before the Virginia Tech tragedy, bringing together university personnel from across the state for what is now an annual conference devoted to campus safety concerns.

- **Excellence.** Publications such as *U.S. News*, *Barron's* and *Princeton Review*, as well as accreditors, have examined the 21st century Winthrop repeatedly and documented it to be of high quality and value — worthy of being listed often among the best universities of its kind.

Together with these wide-ranging statewide initiatives, the transformative energy generated at Winthrop now benefits every corner of the state. Certainly, such transformation does not occur because of one leader's vision or commitment. But neither does it happen without a leader of extraordinary vision and commitment.

As many college presidents have come and gone from South Carolina, we should be grateful that Tony DiGiorgio chose to make his life's work here among us.

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