By Eric Goldscheider

STEM disciplines by merging the already reputable schools of technology and engineering with a new program in architecture, creating the College of Engineering, Technology, and Architecture. “We built a larger critical mass that allowed us to get ahead of the curve,” he says. Now the programs in this college are among the University’s fastest growing majors.

The University’s curriculum has expanded with new programs that are responsive to the needs of a changing world, such as degrees in web design and health sciences.

Walt guided the University through two national economic downturns during his tenure. Still the endowment has grown from $77 million to $152 million and the University completed a $175 million campaign. But the numbers, buildings, and programs don’t tell the whole story of Walt Harrison as University president.

Creating and sustaining a true sense of community is important to him. Racial justice and harmony are special objectives “I am one of those people who believe that race is a defining tension in America,” he says.

Before coming to Hartford, Walt was a vice president at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor for nearly 10 years. There he received a trial by fire in what it is like to be at the vortex of affirmative action battles in a charged political climate.

He was the Michigan administration’s point person on a case that went to the Supreme Court based on complaints brought by two young white people, one an undergraduate and the other an aspiring law student, who argued that they were denied admission even though they had better academic records than African Americans who got in.

Walt remembers appearing on several TV programs to debate one of the students. He says his role was to make the case in the press that “there is a societal good that comes from having an accessible and affordable university,” and that there are many legitimate ways of making that happen.

In 2003, a few years after the media scrum during which Harrison had been the University of Michigan’s voice, Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor wrote the prevailing opinion in what became a landmark decision setting parameters allowing race-conscious criteria for bringing more minority students into higher education.
Walter Harrison

Walt wrote his doctoral dissertation on baseball in literature and he maintains a fascination with sports in society. As part of a course he co-taught during most of his time at the University called “Discovering America 1945 to the Present,” he had his students read August Wilson’s play “Fences.” The play, recently made into a movie with Denzel Washington and Viola Davis, is about a former Negro League baseball player who drives a garbage truck in Pittsburgh and struggles with the hopes and dreams he has for himself and his family amid the complex layers of inequities and affronts wrought by racism.

It also portrays a part of the American experience that Walt gained insight into while growing up in Natrona Heights, Pennsylvania, about 24 miles northeast of Pittsburgh.

Part of Walt’s personal story is that his father was a Jewish businessman who, with his brother, ran a men’s clothing store established by their Eastern European immigrant parents. Both his parents, Alice and Lester, had been talented students whose dreams of continued academic fulfillment were denied by circumstances of poverty and civic obligations during the Great Depression and the Second World War.

Walt’s father became ill with Parkinson’s disease when Walt and his sister, Sally, were young and his parents often traveled to New York on extended trips for experimental treatments. When his parents were away, Walt and Sally moved in with James and Elizabeth Cameron, African Americans who two decades earlier came north from western Georgia as part of the Great Migration.

In his 2016 commencement address and in several subsequent speeches, Walt spoke of the influence of his “genetic ancestors who were immigrants and spiritual ancestors who were American slaves.” He told the graduating class, “I had parents who were Jewish, and parents (who are people I feel were my parents) who were Baptist. I learned to love opera and musical theatre from Alice and Lester, and gospel and rhythm and blues from Liz and Jim. I learned to love books and baseball from all of them!”

He remembers that he and his sister were considered “rowdy” at the synagogue attended by his grandparents and then for two years were “the two quiet white children in the corner” at the Baptist church.

Walt says he and Sally were bullied when they were young because they are Jewish. He also witnessed insults to basic human dignity based on skin color alone, including when Liz died during a routine operation and the hospital would not release any information on what happened. Not even her husband ever found out.

“I wouldn’t ever claim to be African American,” said Harrison. “But I had an experience of living in an environment which really shaped my understanding of how different people view the world in different ways and what they have in common.”

Harrison’s Jewish grandfather, Samuel, fled murderous pogroms in Europe. As a new American, arriving penniless at the age of 13 to join his brother Banyamin who came before him, he traversed Appalachia selling sewing needles, thread, and cloth before establishing a string of businesses culminating in the store that supported Walt as a child.

“I am one generation removed from an immigrant, and two generations removed from American slaves,” he said. “I think about that every day of my life.”

“I am concerned about the increasingly prevalent belief that what divides us as Americans and as human beings is more powerful than what unites us.”

Above: Harrison has degrees from Trinity College, University of Michigan, and University of California-Davis. (Right) at the 2017 MLK Day, he spoke about the influence of James Cameron on his life.
His experiences promoting diversity nationally through his work at the University of Michigan prepared him to create pathways toward diversity through a decidedly less contentious process.

The University of Hartford has valued diversity and inclusion from its inception 60 years ago. Walt helped take those values to another level by fulfilling the mandate to grow the under-represented student population and nurturing a culture of pride and achievement that lifts everyone.

In his 19 years leading the University there have been numerous times that the entire campus, students, faculty, and staff, has come together to support each other in times of need and crisis. And the campus community is not insular; there are many annual and impromptu events to support the community surrounding the University campus and the three towns in which the University sits.

As he is handing his successor an intellectually vibrant and highly diverse community, Walt says he is well aware of the challenges posed by the present political climate.

“I am concerned about the increasingly prevalent belief that what divides us as Americans and as human beings is more powerful than what unites us” he says. “And that, I strongly believe, is not only wrong; it is dangerous.”

Walt has reason to trust that the University will persevere and thrive. “This University has from its founding always been about a world-class education for students regardless of their socio economic status,” he says. “That’s a more important role now than ever. It’s our strength. It’s also going to be one of our largest challenges because there is plenty of evidence that there is a growing divide between the wealthiest and poorest Americans.”

As president, Walt built many real sidewalks between the buildings constructed under his watch. The programs they house and offer are vital to the success of the institution. Equally important are the metaphoric sidewalks. They connect and bond the University’s sense of shared purpose—to provide a world-class education to all who are admitted—and maintain a strong University community. Sidewalks, and connections, that will continue.

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