On the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, I visited the University of Hartford Magnet School to attend the school’s daily opening assembly. Every time I visit the magnet school, I come away more and more impressed, but what I saw that Wednesday left me close to tears.

All 262 students sat politely on the floor of the agora, the school’s central room, dressed in the red and white of the University of Hartford. They presented me with a thank-you card and a brilliant photograph of the school by the University’s own Jeff Feldmann, and then the entire student body serenaded me with a stirring rendition of the University’s new fight song, “Fly High.”

I couldn’t think of a better way of capturing the wonderful spirit of the magnet school or of the entire University than that moment. The school’s pupils symbolize in a very concrete way all of our hopes for a better world, and the new fight song captures perfectly the soaring hopes of this University.

Indeed, when the visiting team from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, the accrediting body that visits the University every 10 years, left campus in October, they told Provost Donna Randall and me that they had never seen a University with a stronger sense of optimism about the future. Their comment was a wonderful third-party endorsement for something I have been sensing this year. A new magnet school, new roads and parking lots, a new face on Bates House, and major improvements to our infrastructure all are tangible evidence of a University on the move.

This truly is our golden age.

This wonderful sense of excitement and optimism contrasts sharply with a somber, reflective, and resolute national and international mood following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 and the war in Afghanistan. I wrote a letter to our alumni shortly after Sept. 11, and many of you have been kind enough to write or e-mail me in response. I can tell you now, more than three months after the terrorist attacks, that I continue to be cheered by the response of our campus community. We are emotionally and intellectually reflective about the nature of the attacks and the international response, resolute in our determination to bring the perpetrators to justice, and welcoming and caring for the welfare of our students. This is how universities should be: open to the widest range of viewpoints and welcoming to students from all over the world.

We’ve had assemblies, symposia, and lectures. Faculty have used the attacks and the American and international response in classes. Students, faculty, and staff have volunteered to give blood and money.

To the best of our knowledge, two of our current students lost parents in the attacks; four of our alumni lost their lives. Two of our students have been called to active duty by their reserve units. I have pledged to meet the unmet financial need of the two students who lost parents, and we have made it possible for our two reservists not to lose their financial aid while on active duty. Our international students tell me that they have found the campus community to be welcoming and understanding.

So it was a wonderful autumn and a trying one, a season for both celebration and understanding, a time of both reflection and resolve. We have proven ourselves to be a true learning community, united by a single purpose, a shared respect and sense of caring for each other. It is indeed a grand time to be here.

At the same time, it has been a season of transition, as W. Stephen Jeffrey, who served the University well for over five years as vice president for external affairs, announced he was leaving the University for a similar position at the American University of Beirut. We all wish Steve well as he undertakes an assignment in that most critical part of the world.

Steve leaves the University a better place than he found it. His energy, creativity, and expertise added greatly to our development, alumni relations, and communications efforts. Steve has also been an exemplary University citizen, chairing or serving as a member of a number of key committees. We are greatly in his debt.

Nothing attests to Steve’s efforts more clearly than the absolutely wonderful public kickoff of the Campaign of Commitment on Sept. 29. As the article elsewhere in this magazine demonstrates most clearly, “It’s ShowTime!” was one of the most memorable evenings in the University’s history. I am delighted that we are now well over a third of the way to our goal of $175 million, and I am grateful to Steve for his leadership in getting us to this stage of our efforts.

The best is, of course, yet to come. But building on the emotions of that evening, the strong sense of community that the University has demonstrated this past fall, and the wonderfully positive mood about the University on campus, I am sure that we will fulfill the great promise that the future holds for the University of Hartford.

Walter Harrison

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