

A Private University
with a Public Purpose

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This month we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the day that Gov. Abraham Ribicoff signed a special act creating the University of Hartford. From its very beginning, the University has had a clearly defined mission: to be a private university with a public purpose. Although the way we serve that purpose has evolved over the years, we have never wavered from the vision of our founders.

What was that vision? How did it come to be? How has it changed? The answers to those questions tell us the unusual and important history of the University and how it has attained its distinctive place in American and worldwide higher education.

So, let's go back now 50 years to February 1957 and consider the events that gave rise to the founding of the University. From our vantage point, the 1950s may seem to be a period in American life of innocence and conformity. Despite their veneer of calmness and propriety, the 1950s were really quite expansive. The

post–World War II economic boom had fueled both prosperity and growth. All across America cities were growing rapidly. It was in many ways the decade of the automobile, which contributed to American expansion into the suburbs. This was especially true of Hartford.

At the same time, the return of the World War II GIs and the beginning of what we now call the baby boom generation made it clear that America needed more schools, colleges, and universities. In most of America the demand for new universities took a public turn. Citizens of rapidly expanding cities in the Sun Belt went time and time again to their legislatures and said, “Give us a public university.” As a result, the last 50 years in the history of American higher education have been characterized mostly by the rise of public higher education. Universities like the University of California–San Diego, the University of Texas–Arlington, and the University of South Florida have taken their rightful place as leading American centers of thought. At the same time, universities that had been established as land-grant colleges in the mid-19th century, from Michigan State University to the University of Connecticut, were transforming themselves into research universities and increasing their student bodies dramatically.

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But not so in Hartford. When Hartford’s civic leaders decided the time had come for their city to

have a university, they resorted to hearty New England self-reliance. They said, “We will create and finance a university ourselves. We will create a university to serve our region. We will create a private university with a public purpose.”

But why in Hartford, and why then? Some of the answer to these questions lies in the general trends sweeping America that I have just described. But some of the answer lies in particular circumstances. Three small, private schools and colleges in the Hartford area needed new homes for a variety of reasons. The Hartford Art School, which had been founded in 1877 by Elizabeth Colt, Mary Cheney, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan Warner, and Olivia Clemens (Mrs. Mark Twain), was facing eviction from its quarters in the Wadsworth Atheneum.

Hillyer College, a two-year college, had outgrown its quarters in the old YMCA building and had moved to an empty former grade school known as the Chauncey Harris School on Hudson Street. Returning GIs and others seeking higher education soon gave the college a student body that was all but bursting at the seams of the former grade school.

Meanwhile, planning for Interstate 84 made it obvious to the board of the Hartt College of Music that the conservatory would have to give up its building on Broad Street (next to where the Hartford Courant building now stands). So it, too, was in need of new quarters.

But it wasn't just physical needs that the new university would satisfy. It was also a strong sense

that the growing number of children and the growing need of what we now call knowledge-based industries made it very attractive for Hartford to have its own university. Most importantly, there was a sense—made very obvious in notebooks and letters of the founders—that Hartford needed a university to complete its notion of what it meant to be an American city in the 20th century.

Fortunately, Atwood Collins, one of the University founders, knew that the last farm left in Hartford was available, and shortly before the charter was signed, Hillyer College purchased land in the northwest corner of Hartford, where Hartford, West Hartford, and Bloomfield come together. (One of the other locations considered at the time was what is now called the 12B parcel in Hartford, just north of downtown and I-84. Think of how different the histories of both the University and the city would be, had that parcel been selected!)

Over the next decade the University grew and prospered. Buildings began to sprout up on the former farmland—a classroom building, an art school, a music center, a student union, and a science building. Schools of the performing and visual arts stood, both literally and figuratively, at the very center of the University and gave it one of its most distinguishing characteristics, one that continues to this day. I think one could make a plausible case that the centrality of the arts has declined in American culture in the last half of the 20th century, but they have always been at the center of Hartford's university.

In the first decade the University also developed its liberal arts and professional schools—the College of Arts and Sciences, the Barney School of Business, and what we now call the College of Education, Nursing and Health Professions, as well as the College of Engineering, Technology, and Architecture—all of which in one way or another grew out of what had been departments of Hillyer College. The form of the University was in place by the early 1970s.

The University added two more colleges later—a two-year college eventually named for one of the

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foundings entities, Hillyer College, took shape in the 1970s. (In 1952 the original Hillyer College had also absorbed a technical college that became Ward College of Technology, later to be combined with the College of Engineering.) Then in the early 1990s the University merged with another Hartford institution, Hartford College for Women, and the essential outline of what is now the University of Hartford was complete.

A University distinguished by the visual and performing arts, centered on the liberal arts, and surrounded by professional schools is an unusual model for American higher education, but it works very well here. The University's character changed rapidly in the late sixties and early seventies, when it constructed

residence halls and began the transition from a university of commuting students to a residential one—a transition that was completed with characteristic flare when President Stephen Joel Trachtenberg oversaw a rapid development of residential halls in the 1980s.

Steve Trachtenberg also oversaw a rapid development of the academic side of campus, adding an administration and computer center, an engineering building, a sports center, and the Harry Jack Gray Center, which was designed by the distinguished local architect Tai Soo Kim.

If the Trachtenberg era saw the University become a truly residential university, distinguished by flourishing undergraduate and graduate programs, the next president, Humphrey Tonkin, gave the University important international connections while simultaneously reconnecting the University to its local community. Among other programs, he started the Hartford Scholars program, which provides half-tuition scholarships for graduates of Hartford Public Schools, and Educational Main Street, a program that connects the University's students with pupils in what are now nine Hartford schools.

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the University has become more financially secure and more selective in admissions than at any time in its history.

A renewed building program has added important new academic buildings; renovations to existing buildings have provided new, up-to-date homes for the University's strong programs in communication, cinema studies, and psychology. The Integrated Science, Engineering, and Technology complex, completed in 2005 and the largest construction project in the University's history, represents our goal of reaching regional prominence and national visibility in these areas that are so vital to America's future. And the new Renée Samuels Center, which opened in January , provides the Hartford Art School with stunning new space for its photography and media arts programs.

The University has also recommitted itself to quality residential experiences for its students, renovating many of its residence halls and constructing a new one that will open next fall. In addition, just last month University students moved into downtown residence facilities on Temple Street in what we think is a revolutionary new effort to partner with private developers to bring University students to the city's center.

Two of the most important initiatives of the past nine years, however, have been the two new magnet schools on campus: University of Hartford Magnet School and University High School of Science and Engineering. Partnering with the Capitol Region

Education Council for the elementary school and with Hartford Public Schools for the high school, the University is now more directly connected with the region's public schools than is any other private university in the country; and it is the only private university in the country to house two public schools on its campus. While some might see this as revolutionary, we see it as flowing directly from our founders' original vision.

Nothing speaks more dramatically to that vision than the University's future Performing Arts Center on the corner of Albany Avenue and Westbourne Parkway. When Governor Rell committed \$4 million in state bonding to complete the fundraising for the first stage of that project, construc-

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tion of which will begin this spring, she was reflecting the strong commitment of a long line of Connecticut governors. That line stretches 50 years back to Abraham Ribicoff, who understood that the New England commitment to self-reliance embraces and celebrates the importance of private initiative for the public good. Our hope is that the Performing Arts Center, along with the Artists

Collective (the creation of the late Hartt School faculty member Jackie McLean and his wife,

Dollie) will act as a catalyst to responsible growth and development in that vital neighborhood.

Of course, the primary public purpose of this university—or any university, for that matter—is the education of its students and

the creation of new knowledge. From our founding we have been blessed with great faculty who are devoted to their students. And from our founding we have attracted the widest range of students, from all races and backgrounds and from every corner of the globe.

From Jen Rizzotti's women's basketball team to Hartt

School Dean Malcolm Morrison's annual production of Shakespearean drama to Associate Professor Mala Matacin's exploration of women's self-images to Professor Devdas Shetty's world-famous work with megatronics, laser technology, and manufacturing engineering (just to name a few of the dozens and dozens of exciting things taking place at the University every day), the University of Hartford is a vibrant and dynamic learning environment—and a very, very stimulating place to live and work.

A private university with a public purpose has much to celebrate on its 50th birthday: the vision of its founders, the support and encouragement of its local supporters and donors, the commitment of its staff

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and faculty, and the success of its alumni. But most of all, it celebrates the energy and vitality of its student body, from preschool to graduate school, from the arts, the sciences, the humanities, the social sciences, and the professions. The University of Hartford is clearly a prominent point on Hartford's rising star.

Go, Hawks!