

## Neil Albert Salonen to leave a very different, stronger University of Bridgeport

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*University of Bridgeport President Neil Salonen receives an Certificate of Appreciation during the school's 108th Commencement Ceremony at Webster Bank Arena in Bridgeport, Conn. on Saturday May. 5, 2018. This ... more*

BRIDGEPORT -- University of Bridgeport President Neil Salonen had a farewell reception that spilled out from the Schelfhauadt Art gallery to the Merton's theater foyer in the Arnold Bernhard Center, giving hundreds of staff, alumni, students, and community members a chance to mingle.

It was symbolic of Salonen's 20 year presidency.



"We should not be in isolation," Salonen said a day earlier from his eighth-floor office in UB's Walstrom Library. "I think we have reestablished the whole UB community as part of the community."

The effort involved not only throwing out the welcome mat but also raising UB's profile beyond a 86-acre campus that anchors the city's south end.

Over the years, Salonen has taken leadership roles in the Bridgeport Regional Business Council, the Bridgeport Public Education Fund and the Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges. UB has forged partnerships with the city school system. Salonen can often be spotted feting visitors or a student sports team at a city restaurant.

"Both Neil and his wife Rebecca have become pillars of the Bridgeport community," Marge Hiller, executive director of the public education fund after giving the couple an award at a ceremony last week. "Neil Salonen moved the University of Bridgeport from an institution on the brink to an accredited and well-respected institution of higher education."

For his part, Salonen said his mission was simple: balance the budget and make sure when he passed the baton, the university was in a attractive enough position that it would get really qualified candidates.

"The university got some outstanding candidates," Salonen said.

Laura Skandera Trombley, 57, president emerita of Pitzer College in Claremont, Calif will take over as UB's tenth president in July.



### **Building trust**

Salonen's goodbye -- he actually leaves the job at the end of June -- is different from the welcome he received when he accepted the presidency in 2000.

At the time UB struggled to make ends meet. The public was still leery of UB's affiliation with the Professors World Peace Academy, a group funded by Rev. Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church.

That Salonen was both a member of the Unification Church and chair of the search committee did not calm the uneasiness.

UB was near financial collapse in the early 1990's when it was given a forgivable loan from the Professors World Peace Academy, a group funded by the church.

In exchange for \$100 million in donations, the PWPA was allowed to name up to 60 percent of trustees. Most of its nominees ended up being members of the greater Bridgeport community. Salonen said maybe two or three of UB's current board belongs to the church.



"The funding may have come (from the church) but it was for a noble purpose," Salonen said. "This wasn't about anything else except restoring the fiscal integrity of UB, raising its academic prominence and its ability to contribute to the community."

Salonen said Rev. Moon and the people around him wanted to help. Some in the PWPA had a notion of creating a network of universities that would promote global understanding, he added. That never came about. Moon died in 2012.

Salonen knew some held reservations when he became president but said his job was focused on making the place work.

Most, he said, are aware that the church has had little influence on anything ever done on campus.

Mickie Herbert, the departing director of the Bridgeport Regional Business Council, agreed, calling Salonen a breath of fresh air.

"We were all a little worried at first," Herbert said of UB's affiliation with a group funded by the Unification Church.

Those worries disappeared once Herbert got to know Salonen.

The same could not be said of Bill Finch, a state senator when Salonen became president and later Bridgeport's mayor.

Finch never accepted UB's alliance with the PWPA. He refused to step on campus. Each time the UB gymnastics team won a national championship and was honored by the Bridgeport City Council, Finch stayed away.

"I never gave up on believing I could melt his opposition," Salonen said.

It's one of the few things Salonen will leave unaccomplished.



### **Help from other places**

As university president, Salonen said he put every skill he had ever learned to use: legal, financial, public relations, group dynamics and working with kids.

He acquired new skills as well, such as how to say "no" when he wanted to say "yes."

"Every time we made a decision on an investment of capital dollars (Salonen) was 'What is the impact on students,'" said George Estrada, a former city facilities director who became UB facilities director 10 years ago. "He wanted to know 'How can we get the biggest bang for buck.'"

Salonen said his aim was to live on the university's current revenue.

If enrollment went down, so did the budget. This fiscal year, when the university's international enrollment dipped over uncertainties about the Trump travel ban, there were staffing cuts.

"There have been times when we have had to make budgetary adjustments and I do it, but I do it slowly and only when it is needed," Salonen said.

Retired Fairfield University President Jeffrey von Arx, who gave the invocation at Salonen's reception, called it impressive to watch Salonen, year by year, building up the institution.

"It was a real turnaround, what he did," said von Arx, adding Salonen was one of the first people to reach out to him to offer advice on understanding personalities on the Connecticut scene and lobbying in Hartford.

John Torres, director of Bridgeport Caribe Youth Leaders, called Salonen a great community partner. When the group was looking for a place to hold a Saturday Academy for students, UB offered them space.

"It became our home," Torres said of the UB campus. "Neil had this desire, enthusiasm, energy and passion to really help people."

Richard Rubenstein, 94, president before Salonen, said his successor did a marvelous job.

"He did things I couldn't do," Rubenstein said.



### **The wow factor**

Over the years Salonen has put a lot of stock in what he calls "the wow factor."

"Every summer we do something that so when students come back they say, "Wow, look at that."

It could be a new soccer field, a new dorm, or some new high tech equipment.

"It's about making tomorrow a little better than today," Salonen said.

In 2000, the university was not at the break even point financially. By 2010, it had a \$10 million endowment. In 2016 it was \$33 million.



Instead of benefactors trying to take their names off buildings, they are now investing millions into campus modernization. It is how UB has a refurbished its business school and how one of UB's campus mansions is being re-purposed into an innovation center.



UB continues to have a large international population and a growing number of Fulbright scholars. It's enrollment is double what it was two decades ago.

"I think our academic strengths have been always been stronger than our profile shows," Salonen said.

Its strength, he added, lies in unique graduate programs -- not only acupuncture or chiropractic medicine but degrees that blend Industrial Design and engineering or engineering and management.

UB also serves first generation undergraduates.

"They don't all make it," he said. "But when we succeed we have changed a life, probably a family and very often a community."

Salonen and his wife Rebecca will retire to Maryland, midway between children and grandchildren in Philadelphia and D.C. He intends to help his son with a furniture making business and perhaps consult.

"We are not committing ourselves to anything else," Salonen said.

