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Bethany College President Focused

By LINDA COMINS Arts & Living Editor

Despite the economic woes gripping the nation, Bethany College President Scott D. Miller remains optimistic about Bethany's endowment, giving levels and enrollment figures, as well as its place in academia.

Even in the midst of world economic uncertainty, "our contacts, inquiries and applications are very strong" for the 2009-10 academic year and another incoming class of 300-plus students is anticipated, Miller said. "We're running very strong in admissions right now despite the economy," he said. "We're running ahead of last year."

He acknowledged that college officials have to work more closely with prospective students on financial aid packages, but he said, "We have a very good scholarship program so we can make a Bethany education affordable."

On another positive note, Bethany continues to hold the largest endowment of any private college in West Virginia, he said. At the start of the 2008-09 academic year, Bethany had \$49 million in its endowment, he said. Last year, Bethany took a 5.4-percent draw on its annual endowment income as a revenue source, and that is the average rate of endowment income usage for 36 peer institutions, Miller said.

Of course, current market conditions have resulted in quite significant losses for many institutions' endowments. Since last year, Bethany's endowment has lost 22 percent of its value, which Miller said is "consistent with national data."

Meanwhile, donor support remains strong, with Bethany benefiting from a \$17 million giving year, with \$6.5 million in contributions for endowed funds, the president said. Alumni giving increased from 17 to 22 percent, he added. Donors' generosity has "helped offset the impact of the world economy," he remarked.

In 2008, Bethany launched a five-year, \$52 million capital campaign, dubbed "Transformation Now! The Campaign for Bethany College." The \$17 million raised in the first year is nearly double the target amount for that period.

College officials propose within the \$52 million goal to designate \$25 million for endowment, \$20 million for capital (physical) improvements and \$7 million for current operations, Miller said.



In his second year of leadership, Bethany College President Scott D. Miller is upbeat about Bethany's role as "a small college of national distinction."

Photo by Linda Comins

Reflecting on his first 15 months in office, the president said, "We're excited. It's been a good first year. The people of Bethany College are very special. I'm in my third college presidency. The passion that I've seen from graduates of Bethany College is something I haven't seen anywhere else. The love for this place is just remarkable."

Since Miller assumed the presidency in January 2008, a number of physical improvements have been made on the Bethany campus; additional facilities have been opened; new programs have been implemented; new relationships with other institutions have been forged and a major fundraising campaign has begun.

Miller - who admits candidly "I'm a really driven individual" - commented, "I'm pleased with the progress, but I am not satisfied with the progress."

Bethany's 19th president has several more concrete goals, including completion of a 10-year master plan, another renovation of Cochran Hall and significant upgrades in technology. A maintenance plan also is being implemented for the college properties. Well aware of the power of first impressions, Miller carried a notebook in his car during his early months on campus and jotted notes on problematic areas that caught his eye.

Citing positive developments, Miller commented, "I'm probably most proud of the way the people of the college have come together. Through their love of the college, they have bought into our vision and are working toward our long-term goal." He lauded Bethany's "very business-thinking" board of directors and the college's "well-credentialed" faculty.

"I want to be mindful and respectful of past traditions here, but, at the same time, I want to make Bethany more contemporary," he remarked.

For instance, he wants the college's "old buildings to be well maintained" and "our traditions respected," while undertaking projects to modernize and update facilities to appeal to contemporary students' needs and interests. A number of those projects have been completed, such as installation of artificial turf at Bison Stadium, creation of a 24-hour fitness center and renovation of the student center which now is equipped with five big-screen televisions and a computer cafe.

"We want to protect the beauty of the old, historic campus, but, at the same time, be mindful of what students of this generation want," Miller said.

In a similar vein, he said, "Being respectful of academic traditions, I see a number of opportunities to grow some programs." Specifically, he would like to add selectively "a limited number of graduate programs that are tied to our undergraduate core." Describing himself as "a very data-driven person," Miller also said, "We want every program to tie to our mission and purpose."

The new president is pleased with Bethany's increased interaction with other institutions, such as a "two-two" agreement with West Virginia Northern Community College and a partnership with the Art Institute of Pittsburgh. The goal, he said, is to provide students from two-year schools with "seamless transfer - with maximum return on credits earned - to complete a bachelor's degree in a cost-effective way."

He also is proud of new global initiatives such as a cooperative program with Harlaxton College in the United Kingdom and an alliance with the InterAmerican Consortium. "Through partnerships with like-minded institutions in safe locations, Bethany students can study with other American and foreign students in a safe environment," Miller said. Within three to five years, he would like to move the

college toward "a requirement that every traditional student take advantage of an international opportunity."

Bethany has begun offering distance learning through the Online Consortium of Independent Colleges and Universities. Eleven Bethany students took courses online last summer in the program's initial round. The online program features traditional liberal arts courses, and Bethany controls when students participate and what courses they take. Participation in the online summer program is limited to students already enrolled in Bethany, Miller said, and Bethanians are restricted to a maximum of 12 credit hours taken online over the course of four years of study.

Miller said he is committed to Bethany remaining "true to the mission and purpose of a traditional, residential, liberal arts college. We will grow in the years ahead, but we will stay true to that mission and purpose."

The president has set a goal of increasing Bethany's enrollment from 850 to 1,100. He is encouraged that the number of incoming students (317) last fall was the school's second highest figure in 32 years. Regarding a timetable for attaining the enrollment goal, Miller said he would have been more aggressive if not for current economic conditions, and now hopes to reach the 1,100-student level in three to five years.

Meanwhile, as soon as fall 2009, Bethany hopes to begin offering courses in education and social work taught by Bethany faculty on the WVNCC campus. The program is designed to help working adults earn a "cost-efficient, high-quality, four-year degree" with two years of study at Northern and two years at Bethany, Miller said. "The educational quality will parallel that which a student will receive on the main campus," he said.

On campus, Bethany officials have committed \$3.5 million for renovation of Cochran Hall as suite-style housing for 72 upper-level students by August 2010, Miller said. Bethany is expanding its summer programs substantially, with Camp Canyon, launched in 2008, and a three-year contract to host the West Virginia Governor's Honors Academy. Moving the equestrian program to a new facility at Pegasus Farm in West Liberty "has worked out very well," Miller said, with 23 majors in equine studies and 49 participants in the equine club.