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New Horizons for a New Millennium (1998-2005)

Starting New Traditions

“I’m really impressed with the freshmen. They’re motivated. And they’re so young. Some of them want to know if they need passes to go to the bathroom.” -- Kathy Carroll-Kinghorn, an assistant professor of chemistry, in a December 2001 interview.

Under the leadership of Dean H. William “Bill” Heller, classes in St. Pete took on a new feel, with the addition of more daytime classes, courses offered by St. Petersburg Junior College, freshman and sophomore classes offered by USF, and the expansion of USF course offerings in mid- and upper-Pinellas County.

Two innovative—and path-breaking—developments occurred in the fall of 1998: St. Petersburg Junior College (SPJC) began to offer courses and academic support services with students on the USF St. Petersburg campus. With offices in the Piano Man building, SPJC served an initial enrollment of 300 students that semester. In addition, USF St. Petersburg accepted its first freshman class since the fall of 1966. While freshmen and sophomores from the Tampa campus could enroll in St. Petersburg campus courses during most of USF’s history, those who traveled to St. Petersburg were limited to enrollment in upper-division offerings under an agreement between USF and SPJC.

By 1999, the landscape of higher education in Pinellas County continued to change, as SPJC—soon to be renamed St. Petersburg College—launched the College University Center at its Seminole and Clearwater campuses. Shortly thereafter, USF joined this collaborative program, later known as the University Partnership Center.

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Whither Suncoast University?

“If everyone could drive a Cadillac, they would drive a Cadillac. Here, we’re denying some people the opportunity to drive a Chevy so others could drive a Cadillac.”

--Florida State Senator Don Sullivan (R-Seminole) at an October 23, 2000, open forum in the Campus Activities Center held to discuss his plan for expanding access to higher education for Pinellas County residents.

A measure proposed by a Pinellas County lawmaker sparked intense debate at USF St. Petersburg and throughout the community in early 2000. Upset with the way that the USF Tampa campus governed the development of upper-level programs on this side of the bay, Senator Don Sullivan (R-Seminole) offered a radical proposal: When fully implemented, all academic programs located on the St. Petersburg campus (except for the College of Marine Science) would have been transferred to a newly created senior college dubbed “Suncoast University.”

Many were alarmed or expressed outrage at this proposal. Students worried about being bounced from a fully accredited research university to an unaccredited institution. They wondered if a degree from “Sunk U” would sink their chances of entering the workforce or graduate school. Critics reminded Sullivan that his colleagues in Tallahassee controlled the purse strings and had failed to fund many programs and enhancements proposed over the years on USF St. Petersburg’s campus.

Sullivan, to his credit, brought about public discussion of the need to expand higher education opportunities in Pinellas. After many meetings with senior University officials, a new “memorandum of understanding” was drafted in October 2000 that called for a move towards increased fiscal and curricular autonomy, expansion of academic programs, and a mandate to pursue separate accreditation.

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Charting a New Course

“This campus is just really waiting to blossom. When you think that for over thirty years we’ve not been permitted to grow, that we were permitted to grow only at the upper division level, the campus is really going to explode in terms of growth.” -- VP/CEO H. William Heller, expressing his excitement as the fall 2003 semester began.

Under this arrangement, USF St. Petersburg prepared for a monumental expansion of course offerings and full degree programs, new faculty hires, and—to the amazement of many—even the long-awaited return of residential dormitories. In addition, USF St. Petersburg made a transition towards campus-based admissions and academic affairs, as well as planning for separate accreditation. As the momentum began to build, however, another curveball caught the campus by surprise: In June 2002, President Judy Genshaft asked Vice President/ Campus Executive Officer Bill Heller to step down.

Heller, credited by many with invigorating the campus and solidifying its ties with the community, returned to the faculty as a professor of special education, still known as “Dean Heller” to countless friends of the campus, his civic efforts make him a true ambassador in the community long after returning to the classroom.

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Interim VP/CEO Ralph Wilcox presided over the massive expansion made possible under the memorandum of understanding crafted by lawmakers and Genshaft. In rapid fire fashion, search committees hired approximately fifty faculty and deans for Enrollment Services and the newly created colleges of Arts and Sciences, Business, and Education. Nearly all of today’s senior administrators were new hires during 2002-2003 as another wave of retirements left new faces in old offices.