10 years of LEADERSHIP

University president E. Joseph Savoie discusses university's growth and plans

More than a decade after being selected as university president and following years of experience at both his alma mater and state government, E. Joseph Savoie, Ed.D., said he has overseen the university during a period of growth despite financial challenges.

Sporting a vermilion red university sweater vest over a red-and-white button-down shirt, Savoie described his presidency at The University of Louisiana at Lafayette as a "family business." Earning his bachelor's and master's degrees from the second-largest university in the state and his doctorate at Columbia University, Savoie did not set out to become a college president.

"I always wanted to be a high school history teacher," Savoie conceded.

Savoie was selected in late 2007 to succeed Ray Authement, who served as president for 34 years. Savoie began serving as president in July 2008.

"I have no interest in being president anywhere else," he added. "I had an interest in being president here because this place means so much to me personally."

Savoie said the university's connection with its surrounding community sets the institution apart.

"It shouldn't surprise anyone that the people who created Festivals Acadiens (et Creoles) were UL faculty members and the people who created Festival International were faculty members," he said.

Entranced by UL Lafayette's unique connection with the Cajun and Creole culture that envelops the area, Savoie left his office after serving as commissioner of higher education for 12 years. Before embarking on his first trip to Baton Rouge, however, Savoie served the university as an administrator for 17 years, filling positions such as executive director of alumni affairs and director of university advancement.

"The university was solid and successful before I got here. My job was to make sure that we maintained that momentum, that we kept it moving forward, and doing that in the face of the most dramatic funding shifts since World War II," he said.

Savoie took the helm of a university considered an emerging research institution, and enrollment sat at 16,320. Years later, as a nationally acknowledged research institution and an enrollment rate just passing 19,000, Savoie said the university has become more "aggressive" in recruiting students from both in-state and around the U.S., while also becoming more selective — all while facing continuous state budget cuts to higher education.

Over the years, the University of Louisiana at Lafayette’s budget has shifted from being 66 percent funded by state-generated funds in 2008 to 23 percent in the 2017-2018 fiscal year. This rapid change, Savoie said, has caused a "somewhat revolutionary" change in state university funding that relies more on enrollment numbers.

"The fact of the matter is that most of that revenue has been made up through increases in student charges — tuition and fees," Savoie said. "That means that you’ve got to be judicious in increasing tuition and fees. You also have to provide additional aid, scholarship and need-based aid to help balance off the deficit students might have in being able to pay."

Additionally, he said, students must be compelled to stay at the university throughout their career. Although the university focused primarily on academic programs — eliminating or consolidating majors that did not generate enough interest or did not obtain national accreditation —
a community not just individuals moving somewhere inland.

"I really believe that to save the coast, we have to know the coast," she continued. "After speaking with the tribe, they wanted to be able to use their experiences to teach others about the decisions we make about the environment and how that's going to affect our futures."

Oral histories have been Stone's preferred method of research, now using a 360-degree camera and putting those videos into virtual reality for students in some eighth grade classrooms. Students can see the community through Stone's eyes while she is interviewing someone who has seen his island decimated over the last 90 years.

"To teach students about something that's authentic and happening right down an hour away from them in Lafayette is really critical," Stone said. "The last one we did was on erosion and I asked a young lady when she finished watching it, I said, 'What was your favorite part?' and she goes, 'Oh my gosh. We've been studying erosion for a week and a half and it didn't really sink in until I heard from the people who are going through it, what they were really going through,'" she said. "And that's what this is all about."

Stone says her work is a cooperation not possible without the help from the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Tribe and Chief Albert Naquin and the access that he's allowed.

"They've been through so much but they're still trusting and welcoming and I mean I've been around two years so everyone's gotten to know me down there in the tribe, but they're just a lovely group of people and they just want to share their story in hopes that it helps others and they welcome people to come down there and talk to them and hear about what's going on," Stone said.

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Savoie said university officials have turned to improving buildings and spaces.

"We are currently evaluating each building on campus, getting a condition report on all of it, and we're looking at how do we fund that?" Savoie said. "We've got to self-fund that in some fashion."

In addition to upgrading science labs and expanding learning spaces, the university is also seeking to implement technological improvements to 90 percent of classrooms. Although the university renovated what he described as "deplorable dormitories," rebuilt the Student Union and remodeled the Quad, Savoie said more can be done.

Asked what he looks forward to in the future, Savoie said he is eager to see the university continue to improve, whether through improved academic programs or facilities, larger influence in other states and more graduate degree programs. Although he said he believes the university is "well on (its) way," he called the task a "never-ending responsibility."

"There's no finish line, but you can run laps," he said with a chuckle.

department as soon as possible. According to Abshire, of the thousands of calls the IT Service Desk receives each semester, only 10 percent are related to ULINK and Moodle.

"It's possible that students are not aware of the IT Service Desk and all of the assistance it offers," Abshire said.

The university has promoted the IT Service Desk frequently in emails, Abshire said, including advertisements on the digital monitors across campus, during student orientation and on multiple social media platforms each semester for students.

"Students should always contact the IT Service Desk to report a problem and open a ticket so that any issues can be logged and addressed by the professionals who are responsible for maintaining the university's systems," Abshire said.

Students can contact the IT Service Desk at (337) 482-HELP, chat online with a support team member at hnp:llhelpdesk.louisiana.edu, or send an email to ithelp@louisiana.edu.