

Midway University experiencing growth

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Many changes have occurred at Midway University under the guidance of its 10th president, Dr. John P. Marsden, since he began his tenure on Feb. 1, 2013.

Perhaps the most notable change during his four-and-a-half years on campus occurred last fall, when Midway University began admitting men into all of its undergraduate programs. Men's athletics were also launched in the 2016-17 academic year.

"We saw incredible growth at that time," said Marsden.

He said enrollment for traditional daytime classes climbed from 266 students to 430 students last fall. That number was expected to rise to about 480 as of Aug. 11, the morning of his interview with The Sun.

Student numbers are important because Midway University "is primarily a tuition-dependent institution," said Marsden. He said a majority of the revenue to pay operating expenses comes from students. Many of them receive financial aid to help them pay about half of their (\$23,000 annual) tuition.

'Big picture'

Before coming to (what was) Midway College in February 2013, Marsden was provost and vice president of academic affairs at Barton College in North Carolina. He had also been provost and vice president of academic affairs as well as head of strategic planning at Mount Mercy University in Iowa before coming here.

Marsden said he always had a love for learning, but never intended on becoming a college administrator or president. He wanted to make a difference as an educator.

Teaching at the undergraduate, graduate and doctorate levels, Marsden was involved in research while authoring or coauthoring four books. He planned to continue teaching and also consult on new building projects for assisted living or dementia care. That career trajectory changed when his wife, Margaret, made a decision to become a stay-at-home mom to their son, Will.

Marsden eventually came to the realization that becoming a college administrator was a way to make a greater difference in the lives of students. And he brought this broad view of how to solve problems by "looking at the big picture" when he became the 10th president of a small, private college in Midway, then facing an uncertain future.

"We had significant financial challenges when I came here. And it's taken a number of years to turn the institution in the right direction, and we have made some incremental changes that have really helped," said Marsden. Having already made a commitment to the institution, he was determined to make a difference and lead a turnaround.

"It was tough in the beginning because people, I think, were concerned about what's going on with the college on the hill," said Marsden, "but we (his family) really did like the (Midway) community ... I saw some potential for the institution. We're a rural college. But we're not isolated," citing its close proximity to both Frankfort and Lexington.

"It was stressful. It was hard. It was a tough job," he said of leading a turnaround at the historically women's college.

Marsden was the right person to lead the turnaround "because he really involves the team of people," said Vice President of Marketing and Communications Ellen Gregory, who's beginning her 10th academic year at Midway. "...He makes decisions all the time, but there's nothing he does isolated, that he doesn't have the best information at the time from the best people around campus to make the decision.

"It's a very collaborate discussion of how does this (decision) impact this area of campus," she continued. "So it's being able to see the big picture ... and getting everybody on the same page ... Everyone's in this together."

Marsden said success was made attainable by the people he's been "surrounded by" during those tough years. And he still relies on his President's Advisory Council

members for their input on various aspects of campus life including admissions, academics, athletics, housing and finances. So they also have a "big picture" understanding of the institution's day-to-day operation, he said.

"It's a challenging time for higher education in general - for both public and private institutions," said Marsden. He said he's reminded of those challenges every week when he reads about colleges and universities facing budget cuts and layoffs or closing and merging with another institution. "And so you have to constantly look at the trends in higher education and adapt to the market needs and reinvent yourself as needed," he added.

'More nimble'

With three distinct student populations - daytime, evening and online, and post-graduate - Midway University has diverse revenue streams that "ebb and flow" with changes in the economy, higher education and regional workforce needs, Marsden said. "That allows us to be more nimble and to respond to those market demands," he explained.

"We went co-ed," said Marsden, "because market data had revealed that only two percent of high school students desire a single-sex education."

He described becoming a co-educational institution of higher learning as an opportunity to remain relevant and re-invent Midway University, which has also become a more vibrant place to learn.

Besides having more students who want to live on campus, Marsden said, "There were a lot more students in the dining hall, a lot more activities on campus."

Midway University was able to launch men's athletics last fall - a year earlier than originally planned - when St. Catharine College closed its doors in the summer of 2016. Some of the players and coaches from St. Catharine joined Midway University's athletic programs, which were expanded to include men's basketball, baseball, golf and soccer.

Men's tennis and cross country are being added this year, with a club team for co-ed cheerleading also being organized.

"Athletics offer a great component to the overall educational experience, but at the end of the day you need to rely on your degree ... to lay the foundation for the rest of your life," said Marsden.

More than 300 student-athletes were expected to attend classes at Midway University when the 2017-18 academic year began on Monday, Aug. 21, and its president credits "a phenomenal year in athletics" for helping recruit more students to Midway.

And these student-athletes are often very serious about academics, added Gregory. She said the entire women's golf team and coaching staff came to the pinning ceremony of a teammate who earned an associate's degree in nursing while helping her team win a conference title.

"That was very special," Gregory said.

One student-athlete on last year's Midway University baseball team was drafted by the Pittsburgh Pirates, but "that's not going to happen very often so you need something else to be able to fall back on," said Marsden.

He said that's why getting a good education and earning a degree "is the most important component of your experience at Midway, but athletics offers another component to that overall experience because it helps students with team-building and community spirit - and that's not just for the athletes ... (Their games create) a lot more spirit on campus."

Athletics also benefit students who go to college because they want to continue playing ball. These student-athletes get a college education "in spite of their original intention," said Marsden.

He described athletic director Rusty Kennedy, who has been at Midway University since January 2016, as a tremendous hire who has helped navigate the process of adding men's athletic programs.

'Career focused'

When Midway College became Midway University in July 2015, international

partnerships were being formed and its graduate programs were being expanded.

A re-branding - from Midway College to Midway University - meant preparing students for life, but also setting them up for success in the workplace.

"We're a career-focused institution, with a liberal arts base," explained Gregory. "...We know our students are coming here with a specific job that they want. They want to be a nurse. They want to work in the equine industry. They want to have a business degree to either improve the current job they have or get a promotion." More than 200 graduate students are now pursuing master's degrees in business, nursing and education, Marsden said.

'Strategic planning'

Looking ahead to Midway University's future, Marsden said, "We're now at a point where we need to sit down as a campus and engage in a strategic planning process again that will look at the next three to five years." Continuing to build its graduate programs and focusing on the traditional daytime college will remain areas of emphasis, he said.

"And I can see us looking at (adding) some club sports and extracurricular activities, and expanding those programs. That will also help with enrollment," said Marsden. "And at some point, we'll have to take a closer look at our facilities to support that growth. We're doing some of that now."

More student-housing and an auxiliary gym are two facility needs "we'll have to look at more closely this fall," said Marsden. He noted that there have been recent incremental upgrades to the institution's aging residence halls - one built in 1960 and another built in the 1920s.

A location for a new baseball field has been identified, but construction will not happen until fundraising efforts can cover the project's cost. "We're hoping 2019," said Marsden.

Upgrades are underway to improve a softball field, owned by the City of Midway, but used by Midway's softball team, said Gregory.

Marsden said one of the first "very important steps towards revitalizing relations" with the City of Midway was bringing the Francisco's Farm Arts Festival back to Midway's campus. Political forums and cultural activities or lectures have been other opportunities to invite the larger Midway community onto campus, he said.

"It's good for us to be involved in the community," said Gregory.

An on-campus "Meet Me at Midway University" event on Aug. 31 will give Midway's downtown merchants an opportunity to provide students with information about their businesses, including possible job opportunities and eating options, she added.