THE UNIVERSITY OF SCRANTON: 1888-2017

A Short History

From the time he first arrived in Scranton in 1868, Bishop William O’Hara hoped to establish a Catholic college. Not until two decades later did his dream become a reality when, on August 12, 1888, a cornerstone was laid for a building to house St. Thomas College dedicated to St. Thomas Aquinas in the 300 block of Wyoming Avenue adjacent to the Bishop’s residence in downtown Scranton. Four years of intense fundraising followed before the construction of what came to be known simply as Old Main was completed, and St. Thomas College admitted its first student in September, 1892. After four years of initial operation under the administration of diocesan priests and one year under the Xavierian Brothers, the Christian Brothers were invited to take over St Thomas College in the fall of 1897 and they remained in Scranton for the next forty-five years as its teachers and administrators.

Under the Christian Brothers St. Thomas College gradually attained maturity. The first four-year baccalaureate degrees were awarded in 1901, although the lack of a state charter authorizing St Thomas to confer degrees required these diplomas to be issued in the name of other Christian Brother colleges. During World War I St. Thomas was forced briefly to become a two-year junior college, before a state charter was finally obtained in 1924 enabling the College to award its own four-year baccalaureate degrees beginning in 1925. Enrollments then grew, surpassing 1,000 by the late 1930’s. Of all of the graduates of St. Thomas College during those years, one man in particular stands out, Frank O’Hara, a member of the graduating class of 1925 who would serve as Registrar from then until 1957, and who was still active as Alumni Director until his death in 1976. He was the first of only six individuals whose full-time employment at the University spanned fifty years or more. The late Marilyn Coar would serve as presidential secretary from 1948 until her retirement in 1999; the late Dr. Joseph Zandarski, Professor of Accounting, served as a faculty member for 53 years before he retired in 2004; Dr. John Beidler, Professor of Computing Sciences, is presently in his 54th year of full-time employment; and Dr. Michael DeMichele, Professor of History, is in his 51st year of full-time service to the University, as is Dr. Riaz Hussain, Professor of Finance.

The University’s original physical plant was for a long time confined to Wyoming Ave. where, in addition to Old Main, a residence for the Christian Brothers was constructed next to Old Main in 1908. In April 1941, the Diocese purchased the former Thomson hospital on the same side as Old Main on the corner of Wyoming and Mulberry. In December of that year, the Scranton family donated much of their family’s estate in the lower 8 Assessing the Understanding of Mission among Faculty, Staff and Administrators in Jesuit Catholic Institutions: University of Scranton Results. Office of Institutional Research: Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio. November 2017. Hill Section to the University, including the mansion which has come to be known simply as “The Estate.” The donation, however, came when the University was about to undergo a major transition.

While St. Thomas College enjoyed great success academically – and in athletics – during the 1920’s and 1930’s, the coming of the Depression after 1929 brought growing financial deficits which the Diocese, still the school’s owner, found increasingly difficult to bear. Brother Denis Edward, F.S.C., president from 1931-40, had made aggressive efforts to expand the school’s operations, including the admission of women to the evening school in 1938. Later that same year he brought about a change in the name of St. Thomas College to the University of Scranton. The deficits, however, continued to mount until by the beginning of 1942 the then Bishop of Scranton, William J. Hafey, decided to seek a replacement for the Brothers as the University’s administrators. Bishop Hafey, himself a graduate of a Jesuit college (Holy Cross), then invited the Society of Jesus to assume not only the school’s administration, but its ownership as well. Transfer of the University to the Jesuits was completed in the summer of 1942.

Considering that the University was deeply in debt and that with the start of a World War the immediate future for higher education was quite bleak, the willingness of the Jesuits to accept Bishop Hafey’s invitation represents a remarkable act of faith on their part. Certainly the University’s first years under the Jesuits saw minimal enrollments. The Jesuits used the Scranton Estate house as their community residence and used the former Thomson hospital building as the original home for a Jesuit high school, the Scranton Preparatory School, which opened in 1944. Until the war’s end Old Main provided more than enough space for the few college students that remained as enrolled students.

The passage of the G.I. Bill of Rights, however, meant that after 1945 more young men would be seeking college degrees than ever before, and the University of Scranton, like schools across the country, soon had a larger number of entering students than at any time in its history. To accommodate this flood of students, temporary classrooms, constructed with surplus Navy barracks, were erected in Scranton’s lower Hill Section on properties close to the former Scranton estate. The “A” (for Arts) Building was located where the front portion of the Weinberg Library now stands; the “B” (for Business) Building was where the upper part of St. Thomas Hall is located and the “E” (for Physics & Engineering) Building where the lower portion of St. Thomas Hall is at the bottom of the Commons. For some fifteen years after 1947 the University’s operation were divided between Old Main on Wyoming Avenue and the “barracks” some five or six blocks away.

During the ten-year presidency of the Rev. John J. Long, S.J. (1953-63), an entirely new campus was created as the University gradually moved all of its operations from Wyoming Avenue to the lower Hill Section. Between the time he took office and the end of his Presidency, Fr. Long literally replaced every office, every classroom, every laboratory, and every student residence in use as of 1953 with a newly-built or newly-acquired facility, with the sole exception of the Jesuit residence which remained in the Estate until a new residence, Campion Hall was built by the Jesuit community in 1987.

Following in quick succession after the opening of the Loyola Hall of Science in 1956, (the first new construction by the University since Old Main), came Alumni Memorial Library (1959), a Student Center later named the Gunster Center (1960), St Thomas Hall (1962), the eight dormitories in the upper and lower quads (1958 & 1962), Driscoll and Nevils Halls (1965), and finally in 1967 the Long Center. By the fall of 1963 Old Main and the former Brothers’ Residence (renamed LaSalle Hall by the Jesuits) were completely vacated and returned to the Diocese. Old Main was eventually razed, but LaSalle Hall remains standing and is now a

convent for the IHM sisters serving in downtown Scranton.

The 1970’s brought further major changes, including coeducation, a revised curriculum and a new governance structure which placed the University under its own Board of Trustees separate from the Jesuit community. Student enrollments began to rise steadily and by the early 1980’s had more than doubled creating a need for additional physical plant that was initially met not by further new construction, but rather through the acquisition of existing buildings located close the University’s campus. In 1970 the former Glen Alden Coal Company headquarters at the

corner of Linden & Jefferson became O’Hara Hall, and within the next few years the former YWCA building on the opposite side of the same corner became Leahy Hall. It was also during that decade that University was able to fulfill a long-standing desire to close off the 900, 1000 and 1100 blocks of Linden Street which for so many years cut through the center of its campus, thus creating what has become known as the Commons.

The presidency of the Rev. J.A. Panuska, S.J., (1982-1998), the longest-serving chief executive in the University’s history, witnessed the return of new construction on a scale beyond that of even John Long’s era, all of it designed to meet the needs of a student body that by the end of the 1990’s had grown to just under 5000 students. This period of construction produced the Redington and Gavigan student residences, along with a third quadrangle of smaller dorms; the Byron athletic complex; the magnificent Weinberg Memorial Library; the McDade Center for Literary and Performing Arts; two entirely new academic buildings, Hyland Hall and McGurrin Hall; substantial additions to both the Student Center and St. Thomas Hall; a parking pavilion; and major renovations to Loyola Hall and Alumni Memorial Hall, converting the latter from a library to a multi-use academic facility.

Beyond its physical plant, the University gained international recognition for the quality of its education which, in keeping with its Jesuit traditions, goes far beyond the limits of the classroom. Few, if any, schools in the country have produced more Fulbright scholars over the past twenty-five years, and University of Scranton graduates regularly go over to graduate and professional studies at the most prestigious institutions worldwide. Further additions to the campus continued beyond the Panuska years under the leadership of the Rev. Joseph M. McShane, S.J, president from 1998-2003, with the completion of. Brennan Hall, the new home of the School of Management, the construction of two complexes of student townhouses on the corners of Mulberry and Madison, the complete renovation of O’Hara Hall, and an expansion of the University’s Conference and Retreat Center at Chapman Lake.

While the presidency of the Rev. Scott R. Pilarz, S.J. (2003-2011) began with a few years of relative quiet on campus, the sounds of new construction again returned with the construction of the new DeNaples Campus Center whose opening at the beginning of 2008 was followed quickly by the demolition of the old Gunster Center. The space where Gunster stood has now been transformed into a magnificent green space dedicated in 2009 as the Dionne Green. Also opening in the fall of 2008 was an imposing seven-story student residence for second-year students, Condron Hall. In 2009 construction began on the single largest piece of new construction in the University’s history – an integrated Science Center erected in what had been the St. Thomas Hall

parking lot. A year later the construction of a large new residential complex on Mulberry Street directly across from the DeNaples Center was started.

Physical plant growth has also been accompanied by the introduction of new curricular programs, including the University’s first doctoral program in Physical Therapy and the merger of the Graduate School and Dexter Hanley College into the new College of Graduate and Continuing Education. In its graduate programs The University has begun offering more in the area of distance-education, including two online Master’s programs in Education. Just this summer the University and the Commonwealth Medical College announced the creation of a joint degree program allowing students to earn both their MD and Master’s degree in Health

Administration, only the third such program in the country.

In the fall of 2011, the Rev. Kevin P. Quinn, S.J., became the University’s twenty-fifth President just as both the new Loyola Science Center as well as the two large student residences on Mulberry Street, Montrone and Pilarz Halls, were opened for occupancy. Work on the ground floor facilities in the new residence halls was completed by the end of that year adding a new fitness center and food store. The second phase of the Science Center project was then undertaken incorporating what had been the Harper-McGinnis wing of St. Thomas Hall into the Science Center with an entirely new entrance off of the Commons. When this project was fully

completed by September 2014 the clamor of bulldozers and cranes only ceased for barely a month before shifting to the lower end of the campus where the original Leahy Hall was razed to make way for the construction of a new Leahy Hall, a towering eight-story Rehabilitation Education Center in 2015. The opening of the Rehabilitation Educational Center was followed by the demolition of the old Loyola Hall of Science and the creation of a green space allowing for the Scranton Estate to be more visible to the rest of the campus. Meanwhile, the University’s purchase of a building on the corner of Adams Avenue and Linden Street extended the campus to the edge of Courthouse Square. What had been known as the Ad-Lin Building was renamed

Louis Stanley Brown Hall honoring the first African-American to graduate from St. Thomas College.

One of Fr. Quinn’s first steps as President was the creation of a Jesuit Center whose mission would be to provide faculty and staff with a deeper understanding of Ignatian spirituality and the principles of Jesuit education. Fr. Quinn also promoted efforts to create for students an educational experience, both in and out of the classroom, that would be both integrated and global. Student service programs have grown significantly and have served to strengthen the interaction between the University and the local community. After Fr. Quinn indicated he would step down as President at the conclusion of the 2016-2017 academic year, the University’s trustees announced that a new Athletic Campus under construction in South Scranton would be named in his honor. In March 2017, the Board of Trustees announced that Fr. Scott Pilarz would become the first former President to return to the University as President. Since Fr. Pilarz’s commitment as President of the Georgetown Preparatory School would not end until 2018, the Trustees chose the Rev. Herbert B. Keller, S.J., Rector of the Scranton Jesuit Community, to serve as the University’s interim President until Fr. Pilarz’s return.

As The University of Scranton approaches the 130th year of its existence, it remains firmly committed to the vision set forth by Bishop O’Hara in 1888, the education of its students within a university community that recognizes all of us, whether our formal job descriptions be administrative, faculty, staff, security, maintenance or clerical, as vital parts of that mission.

The arrival of the Jesuits seventy-five years ago brought even more depth to the University’s mission and identity. Those two remarkable acts of faith made by Bishop O’Hara in laying the cornerstone in 1888 and by the Jesuits in coming to Scranton in 1942 continue to energize us today.

Frank X.J. Homer

Emeritus Professor of History

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