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Sound Business Plan Drives Innovation and Growth at Governors State University

UNIVERSITY PARK, IL— How does a small public university drive innovation and growth in an era of shrinking budgets? Among all of the small universities in the country, Governors State University has shown the way according to the American Council on Education, naming GSU the winner of the 2015 ACE/Fidelity Investments Award for Institutional Transformation.

The award was presented today at ACE’s 97th Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C. It singles out GSU for its transformation through innovation and its sound business plan and comes with a $10,000 prize. The award recognizes institutions that have responded to higher education challenges in visionary and resourceful ways, achieving dramatic changes in a relatively brief period.

Governors State President Elaine P. Maimon noted that GSU set out to become a model 21st Century university by implementing a comprehensive, mission-driven strategy that could become an example of effectiveness for others to emulate. “Putting students first is a good business plan.”

Governors State inaugurated a new lower division program in fall 2014, admitting freshmen for the first time and becoming a full service university. Years of fiscal restraint enabled GSU to fund $3 million in new infrastructure necessary to transition to a comprehensive four-year university and to implement new academic programs, attuned to the needs of Illinois.

The highly diverse freshman class is 67 percent Pell eligible. They are taught in small classes by full-time faculty members. GSU President Maimon said, “From day one, our freshmen are engaging with the top intellects on the faculty.”

Prairie Place, the university’s first on-campus residence hall, also opened in fall 2014. It is designed as a learning community for students to gather and discuss common endeavors with live-in faculty to guide the process.

In addition, GSU strengthened its commitment to transfer students and adult learners by delivering a seamless and supportive pathway from associate degree to bachelor’s degree through its award winning Dual Degree Program. The DDP connects GSU with 17 Chicago-area community college partners, improving both two-year and four-year graduation rates while protecting students from crushing debt.

These achievements are especially notable in that they occurred in an era of contraction in state funding resulting in a 15 percent cut in appropriations over the past five years. Despite these constraints, GSU maintained the lowest tuition and fee rate of any Illinois state university. GSU reorganized how funds were spent through strategic planning and broad-based budget reallocation. The university consistently enforced belt-tightening measures together with strategies to improve
efficiency and productivity, concentrating on programs to prepare students to join Illinois’ highly skilled labor force. At the same time, GSU found ways to develop new markets and to increase enrollment, further enhancing the return on investment to Illinois taxpayers. The result is a 13.2 percent increase in credit hours over the past five years at a time when all other regional public universities in Illinois have suffered declining enrollments.

GSU’s initiatives are creating a model for increasing graduation rates for first generation college students while maintaining an uncompromising commitment to the development of critical thinking skills, language and quantitative competence, and immersion in the disciplines critical to a global society. Reflecting on this national recognition, President Maimon said, “We hope to inspire other universities to invest in the first-year experience, to create clear pathways from community college to university graduation, and to reallocate resources to better serve 21st century students.”

Government and civic leaders, aware of GSU’s growing role as an economic catalyst in the region, were quick to laud the selection.

“Receiving the ACE Institutional Transformation Award is certainly a well-deserved honor for Governors State University and President Maimon. GSU, the only public four-year university in the greater south suburban region, has become a vital institution for the future of the Southland and its residents.”
-Ed Paesel, Executive Director, South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association

National leaders in higher education also praised the GSU achievements.

“This richly deserved award for Governors State recognizes the university’s pace-setting success in creating an educationally meaningful pathway to student success,”
-Dr. Carol Geary Schneider, President, Association of American Colleges and Universities.

“Dr. Maimon and her leadership team of faculty, staff, and administrators have earned this extraordinary recognition because of their singular focus on student success. When I visited the campus, it was clear that what’s best for students drives the accomplishments of Governors State University.”
-Dr. Martha Kanter, U.S. Under Secretary of Education (2009-2013)

ABOUT THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EDUCATION

ACE’s membership represents more than 1,700 college and university presidents from both the public and private sectors.

ACE received nominations and applications for this highly competitive award from colleges and universities across the United States. The ACE award, now in its second year, was bestowed upon two institutions of different size. Governors State University was the national winner for institutions with a student population less than 5,000. Georgia State University, with 32,000 students was chosen among all the larger institutions. Rick Mitchell, executive vice president, Tax-Exempt Retirement Services, Fidelity Investments, which partnered in the award with ACE, said “Georgia State and Governors State universities have shown exceptional leadership and achievement within the higher education community, and deserve recognition for their efforts to make higher education more accessible to all students.”

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