Outgoing UW-Eau Claire chancellor leaves growing imprint

By Andrew Dowd and Christena O’Brien
Leader-Telegram staff

When Brian Levin-Stankevich leaves UW-Eau Claire in coming months to lead a private college in Utah, the campus here will be abuzz with construction of new buildings he pushed for during almost six years as chancellor.

Those who worked alongside him said Levin-Stankevich deserves credit for getting those projects started amid competition from other Wisconsin public universities.

"There were at least three new campus buildings he's been involved in obtaining the funding and approval for," said Ed Manydeeds, an Eau Claire attorney who's been on the UW System Board of Regents for two years.

In addition to jump-starting efforts to get a new student-funded Davies Center built, Levin-Stankevich lobbied UW System and state officials for a new academic building — the first new state-funded building on campus in three decades. And he was behind the purchase of the former St. Bede Monastery south of Eau Claire as a new location for the university's Children's Center.

"Obviously he was able to navigate those waters successfully," Manydeeds said.

Levin-Stankevich's final day at UW-Eau Claire had not been announced, but he is scheduled to start in June at Westminster College to replace retiring President Michael Bassis. Levin-Stankevich flew to Salt Lake City on Monday night to visit the campus and introduce himself to that community.

Efforts to contact Levin-Stankevich on Tuesday were unsuccessful.

Blugold Commitment

At his August 2009 breakfast that started the 2009-10 school year, Levin-Stankevich told student leaders, faculty and community members about his plan to bolster the university's offerings through a tuition increase.
"The chancellor and his administration were deeply entwined in the Blugold Commitment," Student Senate President Phil Rynish said. "It's a brainchild of his office."

The Blugold Commitment is a $1,200 tuition surcharge approved in 2010 by the Regents. It is being phased in over four years and funds an estimated 50 new faculty positions, additional financial aid and programs that provide education beyond the traditional classroom setting. Goals include increasing the four-year graduation rate, lowering class sizes and improving instructional quality.

Raising tuition by $300 annually for four years was a tough sell and saw some opposition from students who wanted a smaller increase or disagreed with aspects of the program.

"I was actually one of the loudest voices against the Blugold Commitment in its day," Rynish said.

After negotiating with the Student Senate to get up to 40 percent of the money raised by the increased tuition to go toward financial aid, it got approval on campus and ultimately from the Regents.

Rynish, a senior biology major, said his opposition to the Blugold Commitment has softened in the past couple of years and he's even taking a new biology research program funded by it.

"It's doing it's job. It's doing what it intended to do," Rynish said of the increased tuition. "It turned out better than I thought it could."

Charles Sorensen, chancellor of UW-Stout in Menomonie, said Levin-Stankevich has been "very good for Eau Claire and the UW System."

As chancellor of UW-Eau Claire, Levin-Stankevich brought with him a passion, Sorensen said. He also was willing to reach out to the community and other campuses in west-central Wisconsin and cooperate.

"I'll miss him as a friend and colleague," Sorensen said. But "Brian has landed a very nice job in a very nice place in the world."

**Leadership skills**

Levin-Stankevich's application letter to Westminster College noted his role in a controversy that arose three years ago when initial plans for the new student center called for the destruction of the Council Oak Tree.
The tree is held as a spiritual and historical symbol of peace between two American Indian tribes that lived in the Chippewa Valley.

The chancellor ordered that the building plans be changed to save the tree, which has been protected during construction by a chain-link fence.

Although his heritage as an American Indian gave him a personal interest in the preservation of the Council Oak, Manydeeds said he stayed out of the debate but appreciated how Levin-Stankevich resolved the controversy.

"I was very impressed with the chancellor's handling of the situation," Manydeeds said. "He listened to all the various voices and paid attention to the Native Americans that were expressing opinions and ideas of what should be happening with the there. He made decisions, he made a change, and people were impressed by that."

Susan Harrison, a math professor and longtime chairwoman of the University Senate, said Levin-Stankevich expanded his Cabinet beyond what previous chancellors did to include students, teaching faculty and other employees. "He's strived hard to be very inclusive," she said.

Rynish recalled that even during rough times Levin-Stankevich held discussions with student leaders and sought their input. "He's not a chancellor that listens to me because he has to and then does what he wants anyway," Rynish said.

Harrison credited Levin-Stankevich for improving the university's process of setting goals, allocating resources and holding departments accountable.

"He really revitalized the strategic planning process that we use," she said.

In addition to his work leading the university, Levin-Stankevich periodically taught history classes, which Harrison said helped him relate to the faculty. "Always keeping your feet in the classroom helps," she said.

After Levin-Stankevich applied in 2010 to be president of Hawaii Pacific University, but withdrew his name, Harrison said the faculty believed he'd stay in Eau Claire for a few more years.

But she was not surprised when the university heard March 7 that the chancellor was a finalist for the Westminster College job.
"I don't think it became a shock, because he's good, and we know he's good," Harrison said of Levin-Stankevich's departure. "It only became a matter this time of when."

In his application to Westminster, Levin-Stankevich praised UW-Eau Claire for academic achievement of students, accolades for the music programs, quality of faculty and opportunities to study abroad.

But he continued on to note how political conflict in Madison has impacted the UW System.

"Unfortunately, external interventions continue to erode this culture as the theatre of public funding and politics in Wisconsin has devalued the work that we on campuses must most value," he wrote. "My time and that of my executive staff is increasingly spent on matters that have little to do with the Eau Claire campus or the quality of education."

He remarked that working at a private institution like Westminster College would give him the opportunity to focus on education and the true mission of a liberal arts institution.

The Utah university announced Tuesday he would become its 17th president.

More than 60 people applied for the job, and Levin-Stankevich "stood out," said Bob Frankenberg, chairman of Westminster College's Board of Trustees.

"Brian is clearly focused on student learning and creating an environment where learning is foremost … and that lines up very well with our belief," said Frankenberg, a native of Chippewa County, during a telephone interview. "He also has done some incredible things at Eau Claire … and at other places."

During his tenure at UW-Eau Claire, Levin-Stankevich has been a tireless advocate for public higher education, said Eau Claire City Council President Kerry Kincaid.

"I've enjoyed working with a man who has such passion for higher education," she said. "I'm personally sad to see him go. I think it will be a loss for Eau Claire."

Bruce Barker, president of Chippewa Valley Technical College, agreed.

However, he expects to see a strong group of candidates to replace Levin-Stankevich because "the strength of the university is long-standing based on its strong faculty, strong alumni and its students."
And while Wisconsin isn't a "very friendly climate for higher public education" at the moment, UW-Stout Chancellor Sorensen said he believes quality candidates will be attracted to the job.

Bob McCoy, president of the Eau Claire Area Chamber of Commerce, hopes UW-Eau Claire's next chancellor is willing to reach out to the community and continue partnerships.

"We have been fortunate here with chancellors (over the years)," McCoy said. "I hope we keep getting good ones."

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