Executive Profile: Regis president Hays has bottled what’s most elusive in higher ed: growth

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Antoinette M. Hays
Title: President, Regis College
Age: 63
Education: Bachelor’s degree in nursing, Boston College, 1974; master’s degree in nurse practitionering, Boston University, 1978; doctorate in social policy from the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University, 1990
Residence: Wayland

When Antoinette Hays took over as president of Regis College in 2011, the Catholic university was riding out a tidal wave of change.

Originally an all-women’s college founded by nuns in 1927, Regis officially became co-educational in 2007 and significantly expanded its academic programs by adding a host of new undergraduate majors. That same year, the college launched its first doctoral program, grew its master’s program offerings and developed its international initiative to train nurses in Haiti.

Between 2011 and 2014, Regis saw total enrollment rise 50 percent to about 1,900 students, with men accounting for about 20 percent of that head count. That’s no small accomplishment when considering the negative demographic and economic trends weighing on higher education, particularly among higher-priced private schools in the Northeast.

But for Hays, who started her 30-year career at Regis as a faculty member and worked her way through the ranks before becoming president, the college’s ongoing transformation comes as no surprise, especially given its expertise in churning out workers well-equipped for Greater Boston’s world-renowned health care sector.

“Regis is a moving and shaking institution. We’re willing to take risks and try things that others would not try,” she said.

A New England native with two nursing degrees and a doctorate from Brandeis University, Hays started her career as a nurse in the 1970s. She said she discovered her calling in higher ed after teaching at Boston University’s nursing school, where she also earned master’s degree in 1978.

After starting a family and moving to Wayland, she began teaching at Regis and, she said, fell in love with the values of the institution. She’s been there ever since.

Under her watch as president, the school has proven innovative. It has fostered partnerships with major hospitals in Greater Boston. It now issues iPads to every student and faculty member. And most recently, it opened its first satellite campus, Regis North, at Northern Essex Community College in Lawrence.

According to Hays, Regis now oversees the first bachelor’s degree program offered through NECC, a degree track that enables students to transition from an associate’s program into a baccalaureate program in nursing, public health and other health sciences.

“I think we see ourselves as an institution that is nimble, and is definitely interested in meeting the needs of the working population,” she said. “It’s always a little scary for anyone to return to school. We try to make that transition easier by meeting the nurses where they are.”

Regis North is a “game changer,” said Hays, at a time of considerable upheaval in both health care and higher education. Both, she said, are increasingly under the microscope to be more accountable and to provide the highest-quality results to their customers, that is, patients and students. Both arenas also face rising pressure to keep costs in check, Hays said.

The sticker price for Regis is $39,040 per year, which is pretty competitive as far as private colleges go in Massachusetts. Hays said she is cognizant of the sensitivity among students the challenges student debt can present for newly minted graduates.

The challenge, she says, is in balancing Regis’ willingness to innovate with its commitment to providing valuable outcomes for both students and the health care industry.

Hays said partnerships will be a big priority going forward, including more satellite programs and graduate offerings. She’ll also look to bolster the school’s endowment, which grew by 4.9 percent in 2015 to $33.7 million.

“We have not had a history of philanthropy here, but that is changing. We’re making great strides,” she said.

Antoinette M. Hays, president of Regis College, says taking risks has paid off for the Weston Institution.