



Gregory Benson

TRANSFORMATIONS

by Dean Rebecca W. Bushnell

At a recognition ceremony for faculty and staff earlier this year, I received a lovely pewter bowl inscribed with the Penn shield above a caption that reads, “25 YEARS OF SERVICE.”

I came to Penn in 1982 as a lecturer in the English department, proud of my Ph.D. in comparative literature and delighted to be at Penn. However, at the time the academic ethos mostly prized scholarship that did not stray far across disciplinary boundaries. I didn’t fit neatly into that box. I was excited to have my first office (however small), but the old Bennett Hall, which housed the English department, could be most charitably described as genteelly shabby. When I looked out my office window, there was a weed-filled lot. You could get a good cup of soup from Mom’s Truck, parked at the curb, but there were few neighborhood options for nourishing the social life of the campus community.

Twenty-five years later, Penn is transformed – physically, intellectually, culturally. It is a more vital and energetic place whose seeds of academic excellence and intellectual ambition – evident a quarter century ago – are now coming to fruition.

Together with the University, the School of Arts and Sciences has invested heavily in new construction and major renovations that have

remade the campus. The Carolyn Lynch Laboratory, the McNeil Center for Early American Studies and the Weigle Information Commons are the most recent additions. Future construction projects for nanoscience, neural and behavioral sciences, and music will continue this transformation. All of our building projects – including a fully renovated Fisher-Bennett Hall, which is filled with light as well as instructional technology – are monuments to the School’s abiding commitment to teaching and research.

One of the most thrilling transformations of the last quarter century is the growing value we place on faculty who display a multidisciplinary hunger and curiosity. Increasingly, the boundaries between departments and disciplines are dissolving. The world’s problems are complex and

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multifaceted, and they can’t always be contained in the traditional academic silos. More and more, we are seeing scientists and scholars reach across disciplinary borders to challenge and to collaborate with each other. Much of this cross-disciplinary change has been driven by student interests. There are twice as many interdepartmental majors now as there were in 1982, with popular additions such as Cinema Studies and Health and Societies, and many of today’s traditional academic departments allow greater latitude for interdisciplinary study within the major.

When I first came to Philadelphia, there were a few grand, old arts establishments like the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Over the last 25 years, the School of Arts and Sciences has increased its involvement and engagement in the burgeoning local art scene, whether in the visual arts, film or writing. Certainly, the open door of Kelly Writers House and its lively programs have made a strong contribution to the arts in the city, and we have worked closely with the Institute of Contemporary Art and the Slought Foundation on classroom and curatorial collaborations. And I am happy to report that the empty lot outside the window of my old office has sprouted a whole garden of coffee shops, book stores, eateries and other businesses.

All of these transformations show how far we’ve come in

nurturing a dynamic intellectual vision in the School. Twenty-five years ago, I was happy just to be here, but we could all see that there was much to be done. The seeds of change needed to be cultivated in conjunction with the vision of the University. I am grateful to have been a part of that transformation. As dean, I am lucky to lead the School of Arts and Sciences at this critical moment, when we can shape its future for the next generation of faculty and students.