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BUSINESSPERSON OF THE YEAR Man With a Plan

Employing a CEO's focus and clarity of purpose, Steve Kaplan has transformed the University of New Haven



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by Michael C. Bingham

As deep into his Chicago childhood as he can summon even now, in mid-life, Steven H. Kaplan liked to swim against the tide.

There's a word for people like the young Kaplan: contrarian. People who just can't go with the flow - because they get such a kick out of going against it.

"Whatever I was supposed to be doing in school, I did the opposite," recalls Kaplan, who nevertheless ended up navigating the education system well enough to earn a doctorate in comparative literature and indeed come to head an institution of higher learning, where as president of the University of New Haven (UNH) he is ultimately responsible for the education of some 3,500 students.

"My mother's favorite story goes back to kindergarten," explains Kaplan, Business New Haven's 2008 Businessperson of the Year. "When I was supposed to sing Christmas songs at Christmas, I sang Chanukah songs. Then, when I was supposed to be singing Chanukah songs, I sang Christmas songs."

It's an amusing anecdote, but Kaplan's against-the-grain nature had a profound impact on his education and intellectual development.

"Anything people in authority told me I should be interested in, I was interested in the opposite," he says. "When I was told by my friends that math was a terrible subject, I focused

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on math and really enjoyed it. And I am very much the same way today."

Kaplan's anointment as Businessperson of the Year comes ten years after BNH selected Quinnipiac College (now Quinnipiac University) President John L. Leahy as its 1998 honoree. Skeptics then questioned how the head of a non-profit educational institution qualified as a "businessperson."

But Kaplan, like Leahy before him, is chief executive of an enterprise with a \$100 million budget, 500-plus employees, a physical footprint more expansive (80 acres) than all but the largest corporations, and some 3,500 "customers" - its students. Like a for-profit CEO, he must juggle the competing needs of multiple "stakeholders" on and off-campus.

And above all Kaplan - like any private-sector CEO - must be (as Reggie Jackson memorably put it) the "straw that stirs the drink."

And in just three and half years on the job Kaplan has done enough stirring to build significant momentum for his school on the hill.

A slender, soft-spoken 53-year-old with wiry hair and a ready smile, Kaplan assumed the UNH presidency on July 1, 2004, succeeding former Republican Congressman Lawrence J. DeNardis, who had headed the school since 1990. He is the sixth president in the school's 88-year history.

Kaplan was previously chancellor of the University of Virginia's branch campus in Wise, Va. Before that he was dean of arts and humanities at the State University of New York/Buffalo and dean of the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Butler University. Kaplan, who lives in Branford, earned his doctorate in comparative literature at Eberhard-Karls Universitat in Germany. His undergraduate work was completed at UCLA. Kaplan and his wife, ceramics artist Anemone Schweizer-Kaplan, have four children.

In addition to his work as a teacher and administrator, Kaplan has authored and edited numerous scholarly publications and written three books.

At the time of his hiring, then-board chairman Robert Alvine called Kaplan "a person who embodies the principles and values of the University of New Haven; admired - in fact, revered - by those he served and those with whom he served."

When Kaplan moved into his second-floor office in Maxcy Hall in the summer of 2004, he assumed the helm of a school that had a few recognized strengths - a strong engineering program, and new business school, a criminal-justice and forensic-sciences program headed by someone with real star power - forensic pathologist and cable-news luminary Henry C. Lee, of O.J. Simpson trial fame.

But Kaplan's immediate agenda was dominated not by UNH's strengths, but by its many challenges.

Within days of his arrival in West Haven Kaplan outlined the bullet points of his agenda in a BNH interview: double contributed income. Generate new gifts for scholarships and endowed professorships. Cast a wider net for quality students. Address a crumbling infrastructure resulting from years of deferred maintenance. A to-do list to scare off a lesser man.

Kaplan approached the challenges as any effective CEO might, with a sober and clear-headed approach to planning, practice and progress. As a result, today he can chart the significant progress his institution has made toward those objectives - in some cases surpassing even his aggressive mileposts.

"We put in place in my first year a comprehensive five-year business plan, and in my second year we put together a five-year strategic plan with a revised business plan to back it up," explains Kaplan. "These were pretty substantial documents with key performance indicators on every important measurable goal and outcome - whether it's fundraising, enrollments, capital projects, community outreach, internationalization. On every front we're way ahead of our business plan."

Specifically, on the fundraising front, UNH has gone from raising "a few million" dollars a year to about \$7 million last year. "I'm hopeful that we'll exceed \$10 million this year," Kaplan says. "That will be contingent on a few larger gifts."

In addition, Kaplan is talking with potential donors he hopes will make "transformational" gifts - those in the \$5 million-to-\$10 million range - over the next few years. If one or more comes to fruition it would reflect a step up in class for a university that had been used to living hand-to-mouth.

The key to ramping up the development side? "We have reconnected with a lot of our most successful alums that we hadn't been in contact with; now we're in contact with some of them almost daily."

In addition, "We've built a board [of directors] in the time I've been here that I'm incredibly proud of," he adds, "mainly alums, some people from the community - highly successful individuals." Not to mention generous. "The net worth of our [29-person] board certainly exceed a billion dollars."

With the regard to enrollment, Kaplan points to a 300-percent increase in applications in just the past three years. Campus visits in 2007 were up 50 percent over the previous year, and inquiries have more than doubled in a year. Moreover, "We have a tremendous housing shortage and parking shortage - both good problems to have. And the quality of the student body continues to go up."

As do their numbers.

"Our business plan called for us to be at 3,300 students three years from now; we're at 3,368 right now," says Kaplan. "So we're really ahead on all of the [business plan] indicators, and we monitor these quarterly" - just like any for-profit enterprise.

\dropcap\For someone who never undertook formal management training, Kaplan seems acutely aware that the essence of effective management begins with measurement. To measure something is to define it - but in many cases, also to improve it. Productivity studies conducted in factories, for example, have quantified the positive effect on productivity of changing the wattage of light bulbs - as well as how productivity improved again once the original light bulbs were restored.

"I put out for the [UNH community] and for the board quarterly updates on key performance indicators for all the principal areas of operation," Kaplan says. "We're working now on KPIs [key performance indicators] for every department; the provost has just developed a wonderful matrix for evaluating revenue and expenses for every academic program so we can monitor where we need to make investments and where we need to cut back on programs."

On the infrastructure front, "We've made a lot of investments in deferred maintenance on things people don't see: rooftops, HVAC systems, ADA accessibility," Kaplan says. "We've also renovated a lot of lab space and quite a few of our lecture halls."

In addition, the school is in the "very final" phases of design work on a new, \$46 million 400-bed, apartment-style residence hall. Also, money is being raised for a \$15 million building to house the Henry C. Lee College of Criminal Justice & Forensic Sciences.

For now, the campus showcase is the shiny new Beckerman recreation center, named for the former president of the (now defunct) Starter Sportswear, a UNH grad. It houses state-of-the-art exercise equipment, courts for basketball, volleyball, indoor soccer and roller sports, racquetball courts, enclosed running track and even a juice bar.

"For probably a decade [Beckerman] had said we needed something like this on campus," Kaplan explains. "When I arrived I talked with him about a gift for it, and at one point I put a challenge in front of him, and he met it." Beckerman, who now works in real estate development locally, put up the first \$4 million for the project.

And speaking of state-of-the-art technology, two years ago UNH opened the Samuel S. Bergami Jr. Center for Finance & Technology, which simulates a Wall Street trading-room floor. A student-managed portfolio allows business students to actually buy and sell equities on the stock exchange.

UNH's greatest long-term challenge is growing an endowment virtually from scratch. Of the top three issues facing him when he became president, Kaplan places the endowment at the summit of the list.

"It's the biggest deficit on this campus," says Kaplan of his school's paltry endowment. "UNH functions as a non-profit - in other words, we don't put any money aside." By contrast, "Quinnipiac in the 1990s when the economy was booming put a lot of [its] operating surpluses into endowment. We're not doing that.

"But our budget is growing," Kaplan continues. "My first year here our [annual] budget was \$72 million; this coming year our budget will be \$100 million and we should generate a \$5.5 million to \$6 million surplus. And we're starting to put [surplus] money into the endowment. So it's grown from \$6 million when I came in to \$15 million, and with all the work we're doing on the development side I think the endowment is really going to take off over the next decade."

Success breeds success.

"It's hard to raise money when [donors] fear their gifts are going to pay bills," says Kaplan. "But we're at the point where we're financially successful and people see us generating surpluses, and understand that their gifts are going to go to endowment or capital, or to scholarships and professorships."

Reality check: Harvard has an endowment of \$35 billion (with a B). Yale's is approaching \$23 billion. These are differences not of degree, but of kind.

In December Harvard announced that it would reduce or waive tuition for its "neediest" (up to \$180,000 in annual household income per family) students; Yale quickly followed suit, raising the income ceiling to \$200,000.

What does that paradigm change foretell for other colleges and universities - that a Ferrari may now cost significantly less than a Ford?

"It's an absolutely wonderful thing that's long overdue," Kaplan says. "These schools can certainly afford to do this, and in that sense have an obligation to do it."

That's all well and good, but what does it mean for schools like UNH?

"I don't think that what these schools with their multi-billion-dollar endowments are doing is going to affect many other schools," says Kaplan. "All of us would love to be more generous in enabling students who may not have the opportunity to attend [college] because of financial reasons; we all make our efforts in our own little and sometimes significant ways. But [waiving tuition for middle-class students] is not something people are going to expect us to

do."

At UNH today, they speak of the transformation that has taken place in the three and a half years of Kaplan's presidency. The bullet points include:

• Infrastructure enhancements - Today 85 percent of UNH classrooms have been outfitted with "smart" technology at a cost of \$26,000 per classroom. Even more visible is the brand-new \$15.5 million David A. Beckerman Recreation Center which has just opened for business (its official opening is February 11).

• A UNH School of Law? - A feasibility study has been undertaken to determine the efficacy of either creating from whole cloth or acquiring a law school, as Quinnipiac did in the 1990s when then-cash-strapped University of Bridgeport was forced to peddle its law school to keep creditors at bay.

"Many people lamented and still lament the fact that when the University of Bridgeport sold its law school, that UNH didn't obtain it," says Kaplan. "At the time it seemed like a very good fit for this university, with its emphasis on criminal justice and forensic science."

To see if a law school still makes sense, Kaplan appointed a committee, chaired by Provost David P. Dauwalder, that includes faculty, board members and area attorneys. "They're looking at what kind of niche we would have and other issues," Kaplan explains. "I can't say what the timetable will be, but what it will take is a very substantial gift" for the 100,000-square-foot building Kaplan estimates would be needed to house a law school. Beyond that, "From the operational side we could fund it," Kaplan adds.

• Getting in the game - In 2003 UNH was forced to drop its Division II football program for budgetary reasons. It was not for lack of success on the gridiron: Just four years earlier the Chargers had advanced to the D-II national title game, becoming at the time the smallest school in NCAA history to play for a national championship. Kaplan notes that the school's lack of an athletic conference affiliation drove up travel costs as Charger teams were forced to travel hither and yon to find opponents with non-conference openings on their schedules.

Now, UNH has been accepted into the Northeast-10 conference, whose members include hometown rival Southern Connecticut State and schools mainly in neighboring Massachusetts and New York State.

That affiliation paves the way for the restoration of football, a flashpoint issue with many alums and former players and a source of school pride. This fall UNH will begin competing in all sports except football in the NE-10. The school has hired a head football coach, Peter Rossomando (who coached the Chargers in the mid-1990s), and he is recruiting a team to

begin NE-10 play in the 2009 season.

Music to his ears - Kaplan is a keen lover of classical music, particularly opera. Now he'll be surrounded by fine music: The New Haven Symphony Orchestra relocated its offices from Audubon Street to the UNH campus last fall as part of a partnership that includes a new on-campus concert series and classes taught by NHSO Music Director William Boughton. "It's really a two-way engagement," Kaplan says. But it symbolizes a priority that Kaplan and the newly arrived Boughton share in common: to move their respective institutions into more direct community engagement.

From the UNH trustees' perspective, the best thing about Steven H. Kaplan is that, to hear him tell it, he is going nowhere.

"I've never been happier in a job than I am here," says Kaplan, who says that he and his wife love their home in Branford - "one block and about a million dollars from the beach."

He praises New Haven's quality of life and says, "We love it so much here that sometimes we pinch ourselves."

His last "job," he says, will be writing a novel. But until then, "I plan on retiring from UNH in about 12 years, right around the 100th anniversary of the university [in 2020]," Kaplan asserts. "I've been very public about that. I have no plans on going anywhere. If you really want to have a significant impact on an institution - and I came here for that - that takes time, at least a decade. Most [college] presidents who are highly successful have been where they are for over a decade."

So for UNH, it seems, the fun has just begun.

"I keep waiting for something to go wrong," Kaplan says with a laugh, "because everything here is going right."