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Education

Canisius puts affordability and access at forefront of new strategic plan



Image: Buffalo Business First

Steve Stoute, president, Canisius University

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By **Katie Anderson** – Reporter, Buffalo Business First
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Fifteen months into the role, Canisius University President Steve Stoute has led the school's development of a new strategic plan to address changes in higher education.

His initial priorities were getting to know the Canisius and Buffalo communities and "understanding how the institution is perceived in the city and this region," Stoute said. He met with all the faculty to discuss the institution's strengths, opportunities and challenges, which set the stage for building the plan.

Answer the Call is a six-year plan that's adaptive, and will carry the school into 2035, Stoute said.

"Reflecting on where we are today, it became clear that we have to think about the big questions and the systemic challenges we face as a society and view them as the call that requires us to respond," Stoute said. "To be flexible, nimble and adaptive is so critical to your success. The plan is a collective discernment about building the Canisius we want to see in 2035."

When Stoute started, the school was operating under an abridged plan. With systemic challenges approaching, however, it was important to develop and implement a new one.

Those challenges include a "demographic cliff" as the college-age population shrinks and the changing view of the value of a college degree.

"It's not the sole pathway to a life of meaning and economic success," Stoute said. "People feel that it's not worth the investment, and part of that is because of an astounding level of collective debt. Those things are more pressing than the demographics themselves. We have to find ways to make our education more accessible to more people."

That's why the new plan is focused on accessibility, affordability and attainment.

Improving accessibility begins with redefining the Canisius experience, Stoute said. The university has traditionally been an undergraduate experience, but Stoute wants to grow its graduate programs. He said that of its 2,500 students about 1,750 are undergrads.

"We can no longer rely on undergraduates to drive our institution and long-term prosperity" he said. "We have to appeal to adult learners and professional learners

prosperity," he said. "We have to appeal to adult learners and professional learners. That's the first piece when thinking about our academic portfolio and making it more accessible."

Another point of accessibility is appealing to international students. He said the university has students from about 14 different countries. That was his story, too, as he was born and raised in Trinidad and Tobago, but came to the U.S. to pursue an education.

"Outside the U.S., parents and families look at an American education as the path to prosperity for generations," he said. "There's a very real sense of creating a global campus here in Buffalo, because the reality is, it's a small, big world. Our students must know how to engage with people who are different than them. What better way to do that than engage in a global community with people from all over the world."

When it comes to affordability, Stoute said Canisius needs to better show that its education is worth the investment.

"We have to keep costs down, but we have to provide an excellent education tied to the outcomes our students and families want," he said. "We aren't educating students for the first job they get after college. We're educating you for a lifetime and a career."

That's where attainment becomes important, Stoute said. While graduation rates "can always be better," he said, preparing and empowering students for their next opportunities is essential.

Stoute's next opportunity will be serving as co-chair with Eric Reich, founder of Campus Labs, on the Western New York Regional Economic Development Council. Stoute succeeds Katherine Conway-Turner, who was in the role from 2019 until she retired earlier this year.

"As a servant leader, when the governor of the state asks you to serve, you say yes," Stoute said.

He said higher education institutions have historically played a big part of the success of the region.

"When people and companies ask, 'is Buffalo the right place for me,' we want the answer to be a resounding yes. not just for 10 years but for a generation." Stoute said. "They

have to see the infrastructure that makes that a reality, and that means the people. That's where our higher education institutions come in.”

A big goal as part of the council is to see the benefits of Buffalo's resurgence reach all of its people.

“We continue to have honest conversations about the need to have equitable success,” he said. “When Buffalo capitalizes on this momentum, we want the success to benefit all of our people regardless of zip code and regardless of what you look like.”