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Wagner College envisions bright future

Grymes Hill school thrives because it builds on the relationship between theory and practice

By **FRANK DONNELLY**
STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

There is a natural rivalry among colleges, each seeking to establish its "brand" and attract the best students.

But with tuition costs threatening to blow middle-class parents out of the water, the president of Wagner College envisions a fu-

ture of greater collegiality and cooperation between higher-education institutions in an effort to tamp down costs.

Richard Guarasci has seen his school's undergraduate tuition rates increase by more than \$8,500 — or about 34 percent — over the past six years. Undergraduate students are shelling out almost \$34,000 in tuition this year, up from \$25,350 in 2005.



GUARASCI

Yet unlike some other schools, Wagner's overall enrollment has remained constant, despite the spikes in tuition and room and board. Almost 2,300 students are enrolled in undergraduate (1,839) or graduate programs (432), a decrease of 16 from six years ago.

"We can't keep on increasing tuition at these rates. It's not tenable," Guarasci said last week in an interview at his Grymes Hill campus office. "I think in the future you're going to see institutions sharing costs. We need

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Wagner College envisions a bright future

to have a vibrant middle class to have the American Dream come true."

Wagner has thrived, he said, because it offers students personalized attention and programs that marry classroom knowledge with real-world applications. The college embraces its unique status of being a suburban-type campus with big-city amenities, and the bright lights of Manhattan, just a ferry ride away.

For example, students in financial programs can get hands-on work experience with financial institutions such as Merrill Lynch. Journalism students can work on newspapers.

"We built our whole program on the relationship between theory and practice," he said. "The whole notion of a Wagner education is building bridges."

Connectors, he said, that link the college and learning to the community at large, such as project in which students work with groups, agencies and residents in Port Richmond.

REINING IN COSTS

Yet even with an endowment that has grown in eight years from \$4 million to \$64 million, Wagner — and its contemporaries — must rein in costs, while maintaining their unique identities, said Guarasci. Pooling resources is a way to accomplish that.

By joining together, schools can purchase commodities like paper, oil, natural gas and infrastructure materials at cheaper bulk rates. Certain technologies can be shared, as can programs abroad and even some staff — all while schools maintain their own brand, he said.

"Affordability has to be sustainable," said Guarasci. "We're going to have to move to reduce or control and maintain costs through collaboration. I think that's going to be a real challenge for leadership and management."

Industry professionals said more and more colleges are combining resources to stave off rising costs.

For example, a consortium of six upstate New York col-



STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE FILE PHOTO

The president of Wagner College said the school is going to have to take action to reduce or control and maintain costs through collaboration, possibly with other colleges and universities.

leges share faculty and student development resources, library collections and information technology, said Laura L. Anglin, president of the Albany-based Commission on Independent Colleges and Universities.

"It really is a growing initiative to make sure students have access to an affordable high-quality education," said Ms. Anglin, adding that schools haven't lost their special "brands" in the process.

She said her own group collaboratively purchases health insurance and software.

Bill Dillon, executive vice president of the National Association of College and University Business Officers in Washington, D.C., said some colleges around the county share commercial providers for their online payroll processing.

Other share personnel such as security chiefs, groundskeepers as well as some technology and bus services, he said.

But not every joint-venture works out as hoped, he noted.

ADDED OVERHEAD

Relationships spread over

far-flung geographic areas can add overhead and delivery costs when obtaining commodities such as oil, gas and even mattresses, he said. They may even require another layer of management, tacking on more costs.

"They seem to work best in their smallest forms," said Dillon. "As soon as you try to grow, it becomes more complex and cumbersome."

To help parents meet soaring costs, Wagner awards \$22 million in merit-based scholarships each year, said Guarasci. About 92 percent of students receive some type of scholarship money or financial aid, he said.

"Our families tend to be not poor, not super-rich, but middle-class."

Wagner draws students from around the country.

They hail from 44 states and make up about 82 percent of the enrollment, said Guarasci. The remaining 18 percent are Staten Island residents — more than half of whom live on campus. At one time, Staten Islanders had comprised 60 percent of the student body.

Casting an eye toward the future, the school, earlier this year, opened its first new on-campus dormitory in more

than four decades. Foundation Hall is an award-winning four-story, \$24 million 200-bed residence.

That's just the beginning.

With technology playing an ever-increasing role in education, Guarasci has set his sights on erecting a \$40 million Center for Global Learning. It's envisioned as a high-tech, high-touch building that will link the classroom experience to the outside world through electronic connections, said Guarasci.

Academic collaborations with other institutions also will be enhanced. Wagner students, for instance, could simultaneously take the same course as students in a classroom on the other side of the globe.

Guarasci said he hopes to raise the money up front for the project in about three years. No groundbreaking date has been set.

"I'm very proud to be president of Wagner, and I'm most proud of my students," said Guarasci. "They're marvelous young people who you want to become your doctors, lawyers, journalists."

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