

A remarkable turnaround at Regis College

Once on the verge of closing, the Weston college has now launched a \$75 million campus upgrade



JOANNE RATHE/GLOBE STAFF

Regis College's renovations include an extension of Maria Hall (center), which will look onto a grassy quad that is replacing a parking lot.

By Steve Maas | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT APRIL 26, 2015

Antoinette M. Hays spent decades as a nurse, teacher, and college administrator before becoming president of Regis College. But what could prove to be her most valuable credential isn't on her resume; it's in her genes.

Hays grew up in Waltham watching her parents launch and grow businesses — her mother, a dancing school and her father, a construction firm.

CONTINUE READING BELOW ▼

“I was encouraged to be open-minded and take risks,” she said. “‘Be a leader, not a follower,’ my mother would often say.”

Hays has used this entrepreneurial pedigree to help transform the Weston campus from a struggling all-women's Catholic college into a coed university with a global footprint and aspirations to be a national leader in health care education. A little more than a decade ago, Regis appeared on the verge of closing after years of losing students and money; now, the school is in the first stages of a \$75 million expansion and upgrade of its facilities.

As Regis holds its 85th commencement next week, it can celebrate a remarkable turnaround — the product of vision, innovation, agility, and smart financial management. Regis has launched new multidisciplinary programs at the undergraduate level; vastly expanded graduate and continuing education; forged relationships within the state's burgeoning biotechnology, medical device, and health care industries; and partnered with universities in Greater Boston and around the world.



JOANNE RATHE/GLOBE STAFF

Regis College president Antoinette Hays (second from right) talked with students last month. From left: Julia Jones, Sam Jean-Gilles, and Chris Cortez, of Framingham.

CONTINUE READING IT BELOW ▼

Regis taps Suffolk Construction for campus project

**College abandons retirement
community proposal**

The college also built on established nursing programs to refocus curriculum on so-called STEM — for sciences, technology, engineering, and math — skills sought by companies of all kinds. The result: Over the past decade, undergraduate enrollment has jumped more than 40 percent to about 1,100; graduate students have tripled to nearly 900; and annual revenues have quadrupled to \$48 million.

“The things that we do are as big [as], if not bigger than, schools that have 60,000,” Hays said.

Jeff Denneen, head of the higher education practice at the Boston consultancy Bain & Co., said Regis has positioned itself to prosper by squeezing costs even as it has grown. In addition, Bain projects enrollment in STEM-related master’s programs, such as those offered by Regis, will increase at an annual rate of 7 percent, compared with 3 percent for all master’s programs.

“

‘The millennial student is looking for an opportunity to tie the liberal arts with professional programs because they’re looking to be sure that there’s employment at the end.’

Antoinette Hays, Regis College
president

“It seems they’ve really zeroed in on a very good spot in the market in Greater Boston,” Denneen said.

Regis was founded 88 years ago in Weston by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Boston, with the goal of educating women and training them for service to the community. The college’s decline began in the closing decades of the last century as students increasingly preferred coed schools to single-sex colleges. Many were drawn to major Catholic universities such as Boston College and Holy Cross, which started admitting women undergrads in the 1970s.

Regis operated in the red through most of the ’90s, hitting bottom in 2001 with a shortfall of \$6.8 million, about a third of the school’s \$20 million budget. That year, Regis hired Dr. Mary Jane England as president and Thomas G. Pistorino as vice

president of finance and business. While outsiders questioned whether Regis, with an endowment of just \$32 million, could survive, its trustees, alumni, and staff committed to keeping the doors open.

The college made hard choices, slashing payroll by 30 percent and eliminating several majors. But the leadership also recognized that “cutting our way out of the red ink would only get us so far,” Pistorino said. “The underlying theme has been to grow.”

Citing statistics that showed just a fraction of high school women preferring a single-sex college, England led Regis to accept men in 2007 (its graduate programs already were co-ed). Within three years, undergrad enrollment was up nearly 30 percent.

The school also tried to diversify its revenue base. Inspired by Lasell Village at Lasell College in Newton, Regis announced plans in 2005 to build a retirement community on its undeveloped East Campus. It seemed a natural choice, providing the college an income stream and nursing students with training opportunities. Neighbors, however, strenuously objected to the plan, which called for several high-rise buildings.

The legal battles continued through 2011, when Hays became Regis’s president and decided to abandon the project. Hays said the college has no immediate plans for the property, but selling to a developer “would be the least likely option.”

The biggest driver of growth at Regis has been graduate programs in health and related fields. Many graduate courses are offered at night, on weekends, and in the summer, which means Regis classrooms are rarely empty.



REGIS COLLEGE

Workers prepared the “Great Walk,” curving along the Great Lawn that fronts the Regis campus, for the installation of lights that are part of the Weston expansion.

Caroline Duque, who earned her master's degree in Regulatory & Clinical Research Management in December, said she was drawn to Regis because it offered both clinical training and courses in how to navigate the Food and Drug Administration and other agencies.

Today, the 27-year-old Marlborough resident coordinates clinical trials for Biogen in Cambridge. Businesses “want more and more specialized professionals,” said Duque, who estimated that half her Regis classmates were already working in the industry. “Having a degree in clinical research really helped me.”

To accommodate increased enrollment, Regis is building a four-story addition to a dormitory with suite-like accommodations for 70 students.

The addition will be completed this fall along with a new entrance to the library.

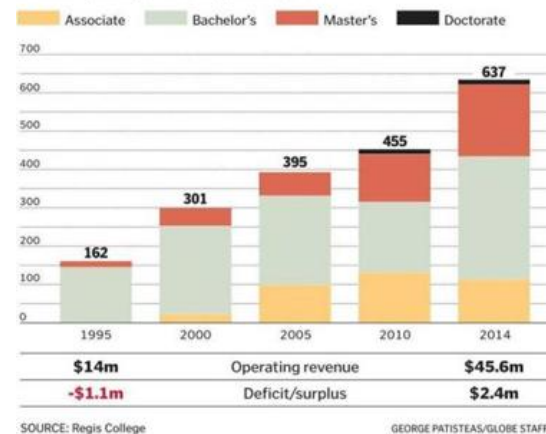
Both will look onto a grassy quad that will replace a parking lot at the heart of the campus. The school also plans to build an addition to the science building, renovate the student union, and launch a capital campaign to pay for the improvements.

In recent years, Regis also has invested in technology. Students are provided with iPads. Teachers are experimenting with flipped classrooms, where lectures take place online and class time is devoted to discussion and real-world applications. A virtual campus, created through online courses, is in the college's plans.

Just as it listened to industry in shaping graduate programs, Regis took cues from students in revamping undergraduate curriculum. The “aha moment,” Hays said, came as more students began pursuing minors and double majors to create their own interdisciplinary program. That led Regis to encourage collaboration among departments and develop curriculum that cuts across different fields of study.

Degrees of success

Regis College has awarded a growing number and variety of degrees in the past 20 years.



An undergraduate program in biomedical engineering that debuts this fall is an example. It not only will require students to understand technology but also health and regulatory issues.



JOANNE RATHE/GLOBE STAFF

Graduate students sat in the lounge at College Hall.

“The millennial student is looking for an opportunity to tie the liberal arts with professional programs,” Hays said, “because they’re looking to be sure that there’s employment at the end.”

The Regis community, meanwhile, is fanning across the globe. Faculty and administrators are helping Haitians establish a master’s program in nursing. Also in the works is an exchange program with the Caritas Institute of Higher Education in Hong Kong.

The college already has numerous partnerships with local universities. For example, Regis students take health policy courses at Brandeis University in Waltham, which in turn sends students to Regis for epidemiology and biostatistics.

One thing has not changed at Regis: More than half the students are the first in their families to go to college. Decades ago, nearly all were daughters of Irish, French, Polish, or Italian Catholic immigrants; today, men and women are also Latinos, Asians, or African-Americans practicing many faiths. Some 30 percent of students come from minority backgrounds or abroad.

As this history shows, said M.J. Doherty, an alumna and special assistant to the president, Regis, through all its ups and downs, has remained true to the principles of its founding sisters.

“Their mantra is service to the dear neighbor without distinction,” Doherty said. “They also practice reading the signs of the times.”



JOANNE RATHE/GLOBE STAFF

Antoinette Hays, a Waltham native, took over as Regis College president in 2011.

Get **Today's Headlines from the Globe in your inbox:**

Enter your email address: **SIGN UP**

[Privacy Policy](#)

0 COMMENTS

© 2015 BOSTON GLOBE MEDIA PARTNERS, LLC
