Will the new New School earn a better grade?

‘Kumbaya’ leadership gets high marks, as does push to unify the brand

BY MIRIAM KREININ SOUCCAR

As the first year of his presidency at The New School winds down, David Van Zandt seems most proud of a single event.

It was on Nov. 17, when a group of Occupy Wall Street protesters left Zuccotti Park, marched up to Union Square, and in an attempt to avoid police barricades, stormed The New School student study center at 90 Fifth Ave. Despite calls from the police asking if they should physically remove the protesters, Mr. Van Zandt took it upon himself to handle the situation. The former dean of Northwestern University’s School of Law negotiated with the group in a calm manner. He allowed them to stay for nine days. When some of them got unruly, he asked them to leave, and they did.

“I was very concerned because at Berkeley there were violent confrontations, and I didn’t want people to get hurt,” said Mr. Van Zandt in an interview at his spacious office on West 12th Street. “But overall, I saw this as a learning opportunity. We want the school to be a place of debate.”

Welcome to the new New School. After former President Bob Kerrey’s well-documented, contentious nine-year tenure—where students and faculty often protested against his autocratic leadership—Mr. Van Zandt has spent his first year as a conciliator, making sure everyone from the students to the trustees feels involved in creating a new vision for the university.

And a new vision is a growing necessity. Faced with declining enrollment because of the economic downturn, and more competitive pressure to build a singular brand among The New School’s different colleges, Mr. Van Zandt has precious few options. But unlike many university presidents who use multimillion-dollar capital campaigns and glitzy expansions to boost enrollment, gain accolades and inch up in the ratings, Mr. Van Zandt is mostly focused on academics.

He is developing new programs, shrinking others and working to better integrate the university’s seven divisions so students receive a more well-rounded education.

Though his “kumbaya” style may just be part of the honeymoon phase, it has been eagerly embraced by university officials.

“David has been really brilliant in identifying the potential of this place, and he has a very inclusive leadership style,” said Joel Towers, executive dean of Parsons The New School for Design. “There are more people’s voices in the mix, and that is producing a kind of energy that can really move us forward.”

The efforts to revamp the school come as more students are beginning to question the benefits of higher education, and fewer can afford it. The number of master’s degree students at The School for Liberal Studies are much further down in the rankings, and fewer people are familiar with them.

Mr. Van Zandt is planning to cut other programs, like the number of Ph.D. candidates it takes on, because there are fewer jobs these days for professors.

But new programs won’t be enough to distinguish the university, which has always struggled with brand identity. Its design programs, like Eugene Lang College The New School for Liberal Arts, are much further down in the rankings, and fewer people are familiar with them.

Developing a stronger cohesive brand, an effort started under Mr. Kerrey, will help the university fundraise. Just $21.3 million of this year’s $330 million operating budget was donated, an amount it needs to increase if it wants to offer more financial aid and boost enrollment.

Mr. Van Zandt said he wants to better brand the distinct colleges into one university, but most of all he wants the students to benefit from cross-disciplinary study. For the first time, the university has put out a common course catalog, and starting in September all the classes at the different schools will run on the same timetable.

A new 16-story, $353 million university center, the largest building project in the school’s history, is going up on Fifth Avenue between 13th and 14th streets. With dorm rooms, lecture halls, student lounges and an auditorium, it will be the university’s first building that isn’t dedicated to a single college. Though the building project was conceived under Mr. Kerrey, Mr. Van Zandt said it will mark the physical representation of his own efforts to integrate the disparate schools. It will also be the last major capital project—at least for now.

David is more focused on the learning part of the university,” said Susan Lyne, a New School trustee and chairman of the Gilt Groupe.

“His focus is much more on what students need to learn, what opportunities they will have when they graduate, and how do we prepare them to take advantage of that.”

Practical project

A recent project exemplifies the future of The New School under Mr. Van Zandt. Last fall, a group of students competed as always in the U.S. Department of Energy Solar Decathlon, where collegiate teams design and build solar-powered houses. For the first time, the Parsons design students brought in students from The New School’s Milano School of International Affairs, Management and Urban Policy to help them forge a relationship with Habitat for Humanity.

The house they built will be lived in by a family in Washington, D.C., and Habitat is planning seven more homes using The New School’s design and technology.

“We weren’t just doing a design competition,” said Parsons’ Mr. Towers. “That’s what it means to be outwardly engaged. It’s a new way of thinking.”

HEAVY ON ACADEMICS: President David Van Zandt is focused on how to better prepare his students for the outside world.

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