

## FACE

### Meet Bonnie

#### ***Trent University president looks beyond the classroom for strategic partners***

by Catherine Morrison

Everybody calls her Bonnie: professors, members of Trent University's Board of Governors, support staff and students. It's a shock to the ears for someone who studied and worked in universities throughout the late 1960s and '70s, when university presidents were scholars addressed as *Dr. So-and-so*, and were uniformly of the male persuasion.

But then Bonnie Patterson is a university president for the '90s, and into the new millennium. Not only a teacher and a leader, but a broker – as she likes to describe herself – of relationships that make up the public sector-private sector community equation that constitutes civic society today. In other words, she is a big believer in strategic partnerships between the private sector and public sector institutions.

Perhaps the most visible experience Bonnie has had with developing partnerships was as a member of the Greater Toronto Airports Authority Board, from 1995 to 1998, before she arrived at Trent. The board was responsible for creating a new structure that would allow the surrounding community to manage what had been the country's largest federally run airport.

Bonnie Patterson saw this challenge in terms of needing to develop “mutually beneficial partnerships to advance society, but also to advance the entity that you are working with. In the case of the Greater Toronto Airports Authority, you're trying to balance maintaining the community asset by way of accountability and public access, and at the same time generate enough revenue to ensure that it's up to date and can sustain itself into the future, without having to draw on a public purse that is no longer there.” Not an inapt description for the central challenge facing a university president today.

Bonnie Patterson became president and vice-chancellor of Trent University in Peterborough last July 1. She is the first woman in this position, but being the first woman is nothing new to Bonnie. Prior to her appointment at Trent, she was the first woman president of the Council of Ontario Universities and the first woman dean at any business school at an Ontario university, serving as dean of the Faculty of Business at Ryerson Polytechnic University from 1990 to 1995. Gender aside, it's a pretty strong background in academic leadership.

Although she readily admits to not being a ‘high-end scholar,’ an attribute that universities were more likely to require of their leaders in the past, she considers herself a solid teacher who has given courses in management, information systems and technology, systems analysis and design and corporate culture. She was recruited to Trent, she says, in large measure because of her commitment “to create an environment that helps every student reach his or her potential; to create that environment by providing the kind of leadership that keeps [the university] financially viable and engaged with the community that helped build it; and to help build the kinds of partnerships that will sustain the niche that Trent occupies in the world of higher education.”

That says a lot about what distinguishes Bonnie Patterson: her profoundly integrated understanding of the challenges that face Canadian universities as they enter the 21st century.

There is the fiscal challenge posed by the shift in the ratio of university funding from an historic 80:20 relationship between government grants and student tuition, to a more tenuous and complex balance. Students, now major stakeholders, pay 43 per cent of costs, governments contribute 52 per cent, and the rest is made up in whatever way an institution can. Fundraising has become an increasingly important necessity, as has the contracting out of services such as research.

The fiscal challenge both overshadows and defines some of the other challenges:

- how to meet the needs of students who now wield substantial economic clout and have explicit expectations about what they want in the way of return on their considerable investment;
- how to engage and be a relevant part of the broader community in which the university is situated;
- how to demonstrate to government that there is an ongoing justification for allocations from the public purse; and, increasingly,
- how to attract the involvement and support of the private sector.

The answer to many of these challenges has been to turn the old way of doing things on its ear and develop new models for getting things done. And that’s one thing Bonnie is good at.

While at Ryerson, for example, she engineered the unprecedented move to buy a local hotel so that students in Hospitality and Tourism Management would have a laboratory setting with a real bottom-line imperative, in which to apply and enhance their theoretical knowledge. Students run a hotel in the summer that must generate enough revenue to help pay off the mortgage; during the academic year the building is used as a residence.

She was also responsible for having every room in the hotel-cum-residence building at Ryerson wired with high speed data transmission lines, something that other universities have since emulated. At Trent this is proving to be a particular challenge because of the solid granite architecture of the campus buildings. Bonnie’s solution? A pilot project is to be launched this year, in partnership with the private sector, to install the very latest in wireless technology in residence rooms.

But for universities, partnerships, especially with the private sector, can be a double-edged sword. They must be handled with extreme care. They have the potential to give an academic institution a cutting-edge advantage, but they can also pose a threat to institutional integrity. The recent uproar at Toronto's Sick Children's Hospital over a researcher's claimed right to raise questions publicly in the context of privately-funded research is a case in point.

Nonetheless, Bonnie Patterson says the partnership model works as long as there are no undue influences on how you deliver, or what you're delivering. For example, Trent has successful partnerships with private sector firms in telecommunications and technology in order to deliver distance education and bring high-end speakers into the classroom.

As a result of pressure from within the university itself, there are structures in place – committees of the university senate and academic advisory committees – for ensuring that certain issues, such as intellectual property, are resolved up-front when private sector partners are brought on board. “I find,” Bonnie says, “that when you openly address the issues, there is less of a problem.”

On the flip-side of the internal need to maintain institutional integrity, says Bonnie, is a pressure point that is equally compelling: “How do you generate new sources of revenue to fund that which used to be funded by the government? There is tremendous pressure from that side to forge new partnerships.”

Juggling competing needs such as these is the business of a university president going into the 21st century. Brokering relationships that can resolve such competing needs is a business skill that all public sector leaders will need to have. Trent University apparently knows this – that would be why they hired Bonnie Patterson.

[Catherine Morrison](#) is a writer based in Chelsea, Quebec. Her work is also published in the *Ottawa Citizen* and the *Globe and Mail's* print and online editions. She was a full-time writer/broadcaster for CBC Network Television and CBC TV and Radio, Winnipeg, a contributing editor and columnist for *Winnipeg Magazine*, and has had freelance work published in *Canadian Consumer*, *Asia Pacific Magazine*, the *Edmonton Journal* and *C.A.R.P. Magazine*. She is also Managing Director of [Morrison&Associates](#), which supplies communications and public affairs services to government and the high-tech sector.