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University of Dayton

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Monday April 3, 2017

An Authentic Leader

There's a consensus about University of Dayton President Eric F. Spina among those who have worked with him, listened to him or just liked his daily posts on Instagram: He's authentic.

That much is clear when he is touring the city of Dayton to better understand his community, snapping a selfie with students or building the very vision that will guide the University for the next 20 years.

“He’s genuine,” said Joe Valenzano, chair of the University’s academic senate. “In such a short time for someone to really assume not just a position, but a persona that is reflective of who we are as a community, it’s really quite amazing.”

Spina was named the University’s 19th president on Sept. 15, 2015. He told a standing-room only crowd that day in the Kennedy Union ballroom that taking the position was like “coming home.” But even before Dayton was officially his home, he was making connections on and off campus that set him up to advance the University’s academic programs, diversity and footprint.

“He really did hit the ground running,” said Mary Boosalis, president and CEO of Premier Health and a University trustee. “He’s a strategic thinker who wants to see the University take bold steps.”

His first bold step was to launch a strategic visioning process through which the UD family could set aspirations for the University, as well as identify what UD should be known for nationally and internationally in the future.

“To cast our aspirations far and wide and think 20 years ahead, that’s a really risky and courageous thing to do,” said Provost Paul Benson, co-chair of the steering committee. “There’s been great value in the quality of those discussions and the high level of participation we’ve achieved.”

The process has included board members, alumni, donors, faculty, staff, students, families and community leaders through events with Spina both in person and online. In all, more than 3,000 people weighed in on the conversation.

“There have been and will continue to be so many opportunities to engage and participate in shaping the vision, because it’s about what the community wants for the University; it’s not about what Dr. Spina wants for the University,” said co-chair Michelle Pautz, director of the MPA program.

“He came to the University and said, ‘I think the time is right for a visioning process. I don’t want it to be strategic planning; I want us to think bigger, bolder and longer term,’” she said.

Spina’s focus also has extended beyond campus; he’s built relationships in city hall, on Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, and with local economic development leaders as well as state and national policymakers.

“I was impressed that he reached out to the city even before he accepted the job,” said Dayton Mayor Nan Whaley ‘98. “He understands how symbiotic the relationship is between the city and the University and that we work to make each other stronger. My initial sense was that he was going to be terrific and he has been so far.”

Mary Ann Abrams graduated from UD in 1979; her daughter Elizabeth is a senior and her son will be starting this fall. She met Spina as a parent in a Columbus visioning session and was impressed with his perspective on one of his goals for that process.

“It really struck me that for him one of the metrics of success is how the city of Dayton itself will be different for having UD as part of it,” she said.

“Words are one thing, but action is another,” said local artist Willis Bing Davis, who toured West Dayton with Spina, Spina’s wife Karen and other family members. “I’ve been very impressed to see the sincerity of his actions and his commitment to what he believes and what he feels. UD is in good hands.”

Even before his term started July 1, Spina networked with Dayton leaders during the Dayton Development Coalition's annual Community Fly-In held in Washington, D.C. He joined the coalition's board and executive committee soon after, said President and CEO Jeff Hoagland '91.

"As change occurs, you never know what a new president or staff will bring, but we know the future is bright with Dr. Spina in charge," he said.

Hoagland also pointed to the University's partnership with Premier Health to purchase the Montgomery County Fairgrounds property as a "one-in-100 year project."

"We have an opportunity to see something very special go in there," he said. "It's going to be done right."

On campus, Spina has made investments in academic programs and initiatives targeted toward increasing diversity. He established a partnership with 2U, one of the foremost education technology companies in the U.S., to create MBA@Dayton, an online degree from the School of Business Administration.

"The partnership we struck with 2U will prove to have a major, long-lasting effect on the business school and indirectly on other aspects of the campus," Benson said. "That opportunity is extraordinary."

Spina has spoken about the importance of increasing the diversity of campus and making sure a UD education is affordable and accessible, and has created scholarship programs to recruit and support more students.

"As a matter of principle, he's very clear with people that he values a diverse workforce and diverse student body," Boosalis said.

Sophomore Shaylynn Hespeth, a member of the President's Emissaries group and a Dayton Early College Academy graduate, said she has been impressed by Spina's commitment to increasing diversity and his efforts to enhance support of DECA students coming to UD.

"He's about change," she said. "One of the first questions he asked me was, 'What do you love about UD? And then tell me what you don't love about UD.' That stuck with me because not every person will want to hear the bad, but he wanted to hit the ground running."

"His openness to dialogue, engagement and concern with issues of diversity and access have resonated a great deal with campus," Valenzano said.

In everything he does, Valenzano said, he shows: "It's not President Spina and UD. It's President Spina with UD. I'm looking forward to seeing where he takes us."

More than anything, Spina has made it clear he's accessible.

"Obviously with our past presidents, the assumption was everyone on campus has a connection with them," Benson said. "So Eric knew there was a high bar there. But he has exceeded everyone's expectations as he is meeting so many new people and absorbing so much information."

Even with a demanding schedule, Spina makes time to work hands-on with students, said senior Brendan Sweetman, president of the Student Government Association.

“There’s a lot of reassurance I feel in talking to him,” Sweetman said. “I feel very confident the University will thrive under his presidency.”

Spina has shown he’s a visionary leader who has already melded into the University’s Catholic, Marianist culture.

The Rev. Martin Solma, S.M., who is vice-chair of the board of trustees and Provincial of the Marianist Province of the United States, said from the beginning of the search process, he has seen clear evidence of Spina’s faith as he made the transition from Syracuse University, a private but secular institution, to the presidency of a Catholic university.

Solma has seen the Catholic tradition and practice Spina absorbed through 12 years of Catholic education form the foundation of his work as an educator and a leader.

“I think he’s always been motivated by his Catholic faith, but now he’s in a place where he can talk about what he believes more openly. His faith informs his work, and he can be much more explicit about that here,” Solma said.

“He appreciates how important his faith is to his leadership as president of the University of Dayton. It’s very authentic,” Solma said. “For me it’s encouraging to see that faith growing and being concretized over the past year.”

David Yeager, chair of the University board of trustees and presidential search committee, puts it this way:

“He didn’t know much about the Marianists when he started this process. He lived it, he just didn’t know it,” Yeager said.

“The University is very fortunate to have him.”

[Read more comments from community leaders on President Eric F. Spina here.](#)

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