WomenUp: Jackie Jenkins-Scott, Wheelock College

Jackie Jenkins-Scott: Tapping Wheelock’s energy, passion (W. Marc Bernsau | Business Journal)

Keith Regan, Special to the Journal

Jackie Jenkins-Scott

Title: President, Wheelock College

Age: 64

Education: Bachelor of Science, sociology, Eastern Michigan University, 1967; master’s degree, social work, Boston University School of Social Work, 1973

Residence: Brookline

THE INFLUENCE FACTOR

Where do you turn when you need advice or guidance? When I first came to Wheelock I was told by other college presidents to hold onto those people who are long-term friends and advisers
and I have been fortunate to be able to do that. I’ve also found some of those other presidents who have become people I can turn to when I need some outside input.

This summer, Jackie Jenkins-Scott will mark her 10th year as president of Wheelock College. That milestone puts her among the most senior university presidents in the area.

Jenkins-Scott has helped raise Wheelock’s profile considerably since she was hired, overseeing the school’s largest-ever fundraising effort, expanding the Fenway campus with a new center for learning and innovation and a campus center and residence hall, and further growing Wheelock’s international presence, which reaches from Singapore to the Bahamas.

“We spend a lot of time thinking about what we offer not just our students but the community around us,” said Jenkins-Scott, who had previously led the Dimock Community Health Center for 21 years. “These are challenging times for higher education.”

**What appealed to you about the opportunity to lead Wheelock College?** I was attracted by the challenges and opportunities that I saw here. Here was this small school, one of 38 in Boston alone and 78 in the commonwealth, that had core values that I believed deeply in but faced challenges to its mission. We’re a private institution with a very public mission. Students leave here committed to social justice and change and a just society — we’ll produce great social workers and educators — but most aren’t going to make a lot of money. That creates a very unique challenge.

**How have you attempted to address that challenge?** I worked with our trustees to produce a 10-year strategic plan we are just finishing. We made improvements to our physical campus and we started a major fundraiser with a primary goal of increasing financial aid. We have made a lot of progress at a time when higher education has gotten even more complicated in terms of the business model and its attraction to students. We have been able to hold (annual) tuition increases to below 3 percent in each of the past few years and have worked on ways for students to shorten the time it takes to earn their degrees.

As your 10th anniversary at Wheelock approaches, what accomplishments or changes are you most proud of during your tenure? Rather than anything you can see or touch, I think what I’m most proud of is the incredible passion and energy and commitment that we as an institution bring to our mission and that all of our faculty and staff and students feel they are part of an institution they can really be proud of.

**Why is it important for a school such as Wheelock to have such a prominent international component?** I feel and the college has always felt that, especially nowadays, students need to leave here being global citizens. Many of our graduates will be teachers working with families and no matter where they are, they are going to experience diversity in that role. We have made available short-term service-learning trips to enable students who are working and can’t leave the area for a full semester to be exposed to international learning. We have also created a visiting
scholars program and this year will have eight international scholars visiting and collaborating with our faculty.

What is the goal of current fundraising efforts at Wheelock? We launched a fundraiser with the goal of $80 million, the largest in the school’s history, and currently are at $79 million. We will use that money to increase financial aid, for some capital projects and programs. One of the things I am most proud of that came out of the campaign was a fully funded endowed professorship in technology and learning and the use of technology, particular as it impacts the learning of young children. We are currently recruiting to fill that new role.

What progress has been made on growing Wheelock? Our undergraduate enrollment is up 60 percent in the past 10 years. But we have also grown the percentage of our students who are the first in their family to attend college. In fact, 41 percent of our fall class was made up of first-generation students and we’re very pleased at the progress we’ve made in that area because it is central to our mission.

How would you describe your leadership style? I try to be a collaborative leader and I believe I’m something of an inspirational and motivational leader as well. I need data to make decisions but really enjoy working with people who are themselves visionaries and great operational leaders, who can take a project and do it in a collaborative and innovative way.

Do you have any pet peeves? People who make promises and don’t follow through.


How has the environment for growing as a female business executive changed in the past 10 years? One of the things I have seen up close over the past 10 years is that there are more female college presidents. We have also had an influx of nontraditional presidents, leaders like myself who did not come from within higher education. That’s very exciting to see those two different types of diversity increase.

What do you see coming soon that’s new and different for Boston? These are very exciting times for Boston. We have a new mayor and education is something he cares very deeply about. I know he is very interested in looking at major investments in education and expanding the number of slots for full-day preschool. I also know he’s committed to working with higher education to help keep Boston a vibrant and growing city.