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## News

JCSU leader pushes school past its gates  
Initiatives boost academic and community profile

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by Herbert L. White



PHOTO/PAUL WILLIAMS III

Johnson C. Smith University President Ronald Carter led the school's physical growth into Historic West End with construction of the Arts Factory, a multimedia and performing arts facility on West Trade Street.

Johnson C. Smith University is no longer a gated community.

In 2010, the 143-year-old school launched a series of initiatives that transformed JCSU into a major force in northwest Charlotte's academic, business and social revitalization. Those efforts earned President Ronald Carter The Post's newsmaker of the year designation.

"The university is committed to being an urban university with all the defining characteristics, one that is extremely important to us that we have a very close, sustainable, actionable conversation with the community in which we live and that is the Northwest Corridor," he said. "We have spent a

lot of time demonstrating to the Northwest Corridor that we want to be an essential partner, to help the Northwest Corridor develop its social and intellectual capital to be part of the player at the table of Charlotte.”

JCSU has become a player by reinvesting in the surrounding community. In October, the school opened the Arts Factory, its first off-campus building, at West Trade Street. There are also plans to add student housing and a bookstore to West Trade as part of a campaign to lure more business and development to Historic West End.

“He has delivered on that,” Morgan said. “In the last year, he has been a strong voice for the question of whether Charlotte is inclusive to small businesses, to minority businesses. He’s been a leading voice in raising that issue, he’s been a leading voice in facilitating that dialogue.”

JCSU is also breaking new ground socially through the Soul of Northwest Corridor, which measures the attachment of Historic West End residents to community assets. The Center for Applied Leadership and Community Development works to develop intellectual and social capital with community agencies and associations. The school, with Salisbury’s Livingstone College, launched a symposium in conjunction with the Commemorative Classic football game to address issues facing men of color.

“I think as far as this year goes, they’re making huge progress, especially as in reaching out to community members as far as their opinions and how to keep the community involved,” said JCSU student body President Erica Hilton, a senior from Fayetteville. “A concern student government had at first was to make sure the students were aware of the changes as a whole. We met with Dr. Carter and he explained to us the changes. We expressed our opinions about our concerns so he made sure we were able to have the same presentation made to the community as far as the changes being made.”

Making connections with the larger community, Carter predicts, will benefit students as they develop skills that will help them navigate global changes in social climate.

“We have an obligation to graduate social entrepreneurs, young women and men who know how to engage community, engage the city, engage the state engage the world for some good purpose,” he said. To do that, they have to speak across all kinds of boundaries. I want them to be able to speak across the boundaries of neighborhood associations and understand the meaning of civic engagement and understand it in that context and come up with ideas they can help the immediate environment be empowered and make a difference. If they can do that, they can capitalize, they’ll have a profession.”

Carter is developing and extending the JCSU brand as a force for community involvement. To make northwest Charlotte a magnet for development and growth, the school seeks partnerships in its neighborhoods and across Charlotte. In order to spur new investment in the area, JCSU moved beyond its gates and put its own money into the community.

“The university was connected in ways that were not seen or perhaps not branded,” he said. “What I found here made it possible for me to move as aggressively and as far as I am reaching at this point in time with the administrative team, the students and faculty.”

It’s a new vibe at Smith, which has become more aggressive in making its presence felt beyond the academic footprint.

“I’m not going to say I was necessarily surprised, but I wasn’t expecting it,” Hilton said. “That’s what’s exciting to hear – Johnson C. Smith mentioned excitedly from different people, especially leaders in Charlotte.”

Carter’s led the way by forging stronger ties between JCSU and Charlotte’s business and neighborhood organizations. While his predecessors have enjoyed relatively healthy links to business leaders, Carter has gone a step further by opening the campus to local, regional and

national groups.

In June, the Urban Land Institute hosted an advisory service program at JCSU to take feedback from residents and stakeholders on how the area should be developed.

"I think it's a wonderful opportunity," J'Tanya Adams, chair of Historic West End Partners Inc., said at the time. "It's definitely time for this kind of transition."

"From Smith's perspective, we want to begin the process of implementing Dr. Carter's vision" of development in the area, said Malcolm Graham, the university's special assistant for government and community relations. "This is another step in our efforts to reach out and grow the area."

The corridor includes West Trade Street and Beatties Ford Road from Gateway station to Johnson & Wales University to the Brookshire Road interchange. Smallwood, Biddleville, Wesley Heights, Third Ward and Seversville neighborhoods are within its footprint.

"Dr. Carter has brought what I think is a healthy external focus to the university," Charlotte Chamber President Bob Morgan said. "From the time he first arrived he said wanted an institution that was not just meaningful to what happens within the campus but wants to make an impact to the neighborhood around it and wants to be better connected to the center city of Charlotte and our entire community."

Corridor boosters envision a pedestrian-friendly community of shops, restaurants and arts destinations that draw upon the neighborhood's cultural and historic diversity. Carter points to the efforts of historically black colleges like Howard University in Washington, D.C., Hampton University in Virginia and N.C. A&T in Greensboro as successful examples of college-inspired neighborhood development.

"I'd definitely like to see amenities for the university and citizens of the area," Adams said. "It would add some flavor to the inner city mix."

Expanding JCSU's reach hasn't been well received in every corner. Some alumni and students have criticized the school's decision to boost its freshman entrance standards to an SAT score of 800 and high school grade point average of 2.5. As a result, the 2010 freshman class was narrowed to 222, but Carter, who graduated Morehouse College despite scoring 726 on the SAT, said the goal is to attract motivated students who will push themselves to succeed.

"The goal is to not just get a number of students through the front door," he said. "My concern is I don't want them going out the back door with no degree and a sense of failure. I want them to turn right around and leave this institution with a degree and they have a great sense of self-esteem about their degree and how to apply it. We had to say to ourselves first that Smith is not for everybody, any more than any other institution is for everybody. We have a particular focus, a particular expectation and teaching and learning and we want these students to come here and to thrive."

Said Hilton, the student body president: "I want Johnson C. Smith to be here for the long run, but more important than that, the students Johnson C. Smith produces, including myself, we need to be the best of the best competitive. We need to be able to compete against the Dukes, the Yales, so all that needs to be taken into consideration."

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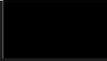
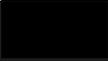
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