

To get off accreditation probation, Martin U hits refresh



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(Photo: Kelly Wilkinson/The Star)

In Martin University's Gathertorium, a 9-year-old boy was standing up anxiously in a thick crowd of proud family and friends.

After so many weekends where studying took priority over playing, the boy wanted to hear his father's name called. He wanted to see his dad walk across the stage for his hard-earned diploma.

Finally — finally! — there was his dad: Michael Fagan, a 28-year-old man who had decided four years ago that he wanted more for himself.

Wearing his cap and gown, Fagan thought to himself: *I finally finished.*

Just as this year capped milestones for the school's 82 graduates, Martin's leaders hope it marked a transformative year, too, for the university itself — a tiny homegrown college struggling under the weight of its noble goal to educate minority and low-income adults in one of the city's most troubled neighborhoods.

At this private liberal arts college in Martindale-Brightwood, the problems spanned broadly, with extremely low graduation rates, high turnover of leadership and unanticipated financial deficits.

That added an asterisk to Martin's accreditation status: *on probation.*

Accreditation allows students to transfer credits and qualifies a school to receive federal financial aid. So for more than a year, the university has worked to prove that it can address those concerns, in time for the Higher Learning Commission to review its accreditation status in late June.

A lot of factors don't fall in Martin's favor. For one, it doesn't have an endowment or foundation to help support it, unlike the multimillion- or even billion-dollar backings at other universities.

For another, its older students face the hard realities that black, low-income and part-time students are far less likely than just about every other peer group to finish college.

Martin, new president Eugene White realized, needed more than just a clean-up plan. It needed a culture change.

It needed at once a reminder of its humble roots — the compassion and determination of its founders to serve the underserved — paired with a jolt of brisk business sensibilities.

The deck, White says, is not stacked against Martin. It's simply a tough hand to play. But if the school can get it right, the success will be that much sweeter.

"We take them in realizing we're already behind the 8-ball. We know that," White said. "We already have two strikes against us. But we know there are diamonds coming out of that, and we know that they deserve that opportunity."

Setting expectations

Some of the first changes at Martin seem small but significant: Move student parking to the front, and put faculty and staff parking in the back. Place the student success center in a more central location. Pair each student with a mentor, counsel students on budgeting financial aid and encourage them to max out credits.

The school also offers a deeply discounted daycare to watch students' children while they're in class.

"We want them to know they're our customers," White said. "We value them."

These kinds of common-sense culture changes, one expert says, can have dramatic effects, particularly with underrepresented student populations.

"You start to change the culture so other students understand, this is what it's going to take for me to graduate on time," said Dhanfu Elston, vice president of Complete College America, adding, "It doesn't take a lot of resources. It just takes a change in behavior."

Martin's students are, on average, in their 30s and mostly female. About three-quarters of them also work jobs, so more than half of all students attend school part-time. Ninety-four percent of students are African-American — Martin is the only predominantly black institution in Indiana. Nine out of 10 students have financial aid packages to help afford the \$14,000 annual tuition. And they're almost exclusively from Martindale-Brightwood, where

community members say Martin is looked upon as an anchor.

Sometimes work or family takes priority over school. But faculty members say Martin's older students are also highly engaged and determined to earn their degrees.

Mention socioeconomic disadvantages to White, though, and the college president takes off. "There's no mystery. Poverty is not an excuse — it's just a fact."

He adds: "People don't want to hear that, but it's just true. It means that your parents, your home, where you're from have a big impact on how you perform. And schools that work the miracle to get you to overcome that, have to really do some unique things to break away from that pattern."

The pattern, he says, is predictable — and it's breakable.

Fagan, the recent Martin graduate, is just one of the school's success stories.

He had grown up four miles away, on the near Northside, and graduated from Arsenal Tech thinking college wasn't for him. He went into the military, got out and found himself without a career.

He lost his apartment, and he lost his car. He moved in with his mom. He cut hair for a couple of years, but that wasn't enough.

It pushed him to start college at Martin, where Fagan quickly figured out that once he knew what he wanted to do with his life, nothing was going to deter him.

He drew inspiration from an adjunct professor who also works as a juvenile court judge, and a criminal justice department adviser who helped him land an internship at one of Indianapolis' largest law firms.

His next stop is the Indiana University McKinney School of Law. He drives by the downtown Indianapolis campus to show his son, Michael Jr., where daddy is going to go to law school.

Driven by mission, not money

Martin is already reporting climbing results: More students are persisting with their studies, White said, with a 52 percent retention rate in 2014 — up from the previous year's 39 percent.

They're also accelerating their time to graduation, taking an average of 10.5 credits per student per semester this year — up from the previous year's nine credits.

White has confidence that Martin has taken the steps to improve its academics to the accrediting agency's satisfaction. But the harder part, he said, comes with trying to buoy the university's finances.

The university has recently righted its status with the U.S. Department of Education over previous issues handling federal financial aid funds.

But its enrollment has plummeted, with 400 students projected for the fall semester — down substantially from 1,000 students just a few years ago.

It's a chicken-and-egg situation, White said, where accreditation probation may play a role in shrinking enrollment, and yet raising tuition — the school's main source of revenue — will be key to lifting the university out of its financial straits.

And when it comes to building up reserves, Martin has never had big benefactors — only people in need.

There's a story about how years ago, Martin's founder and longtime leader Father Boniface Hardin went door to door in the neighborhood, asking for donations so he could meet payroll.

White said that wasn't a one-time situation.

"They drove the university on love and faith and meeting the needs of students," White said about Hardin and co-founder Sister Jane Schilling, "and for 30-some years, that got them through. They were such a part of the university. They were the brand. And their influence was so great that in the last seven or eight years, we've almost been in a quandary trying to adjust to this new way we have to go."

But many say White, former superintendent of Indianapolis Public Schools, offers some stability to Martin, where he has signed a five-year contract and started fundraising efforts.

"There have been a few businesses and influential people who have sat on the sidelines wondering whether Martin is going to be there tomorrow," said trustee chairman Gregory Gill. "If we can show them we're on the right path, they might be willing to chip in and help us with the upward momentum that I think we're gaining."

Ask one of Martin's longest-standing faculty members about the future of the university, and his tone is celebratory.

J.L. Mize, head of the student success center, said White is changing attitudes at the university and challenging students to step up their games.

Martin, he said, is an oasis of hope.

"The university is on its way out of a lot of the morass," Mize said. "I am hopeful and optimistic."

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