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Leader chooses an innovative path for college

By: Nate Dougherty | June 14, 2013

James Winebrake could regard himself as a man on an island.

He leads a college that could be seen as an outsider in a university otherwise centered on technology and the sciences.

As dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Rochester Institute of Technology, however, Winebrake does not view his college or the university in that way.

"We want to find ways to innovate the role of liberal arts in an otherwise technical education," he says.

He has done that, setting out to integrate the liberal arts college with other academic areas through a series of collaborations and innovative degree programs. The college has created minors and degree programs that have students working in both technology and the humanities.

Winebrake, 45, also focuses on increasing sponsored research efforts and diversity within the college, which includes 160 full-time faculty members and touches nearly all of roughly 17,850 students at the university.

Background

Winebrake's background is in the sciences, but his passion always has been trying to tackle the big issues facing society. He grew up in Pennsylvania and graduated from Lafayette College in Easton, Pa., with a degree in physics but he became more interested in problems such as homelessness and environmental conservation.

"I realized I loved sciences and technology but I always wanted to be working on economic, political and social dimensions," he says. "So after I graduated, I looked for programs that really served that purpose, and I entered a graduate program of technology and policy at MIT."

There Winebrake studied the intersection of technology, society and policy and how all were connected with the sciences. He developed a passion for energy, later earning his Ph.D. in energy management policy from the University of Pennsylvania.

Throughout his career Winebrake has continued to work on energy issues. He conducted research in alternative fuels and energy and environmental policy, including a project to study the impact of goods shipped globally.

He has done other work related to the impact of transportation on energy consumption. He collaborated with a researcher from Massachusetts Institute of Technology to study the environmental issues facing China's transportation sector and to explore how sustainable transportation technologies might emerge there.

Winebrake says he was lucky enough to find a job in this niche after graduation, working as an associate professor

of public policy at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Va. He was part of an innovative science and technology program there that looked at these issues through a social lens.

While at JMU, Winebrake came across an opportunity at RIT. The university was advertising a chairmanship in policy, and to Winebrake it seemed like a perfect fit.

"I thought how cool it was to have a program that's career-oriented and driven by (science, technology, engineering and mathematics)," he says. "It was really enticing to think about starting a public policy program at a university invested in technology and technology futures."

So 11 years ago Winebrake came to RIT to serve as chairman of the department of science, technology and social public policy, leading efforts to develop and expand curricular offerings at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

In January 2011 he was named dean of the College of Liberal Arts. In his new position he has the tasks of developing and implementing strategic plans and leading RIT's research and education initiatives in the human social sciences and fine and performing arts.

"I think Jamie has come into his role as dean with a burst of energy and a real commitment to listening and shared governance," says Jeremy Haefner, provost and vice president of academic affairs at RIT. "He's shown a real willingness to roll up his sleeves and tackle the pressing issues."

After taking over, Winebrake gave structure to a college that had lacked it in the past, says Michael Vernarelli, professor and chairman of the economics department.

"In the past, things were sort of disorganized in the sense that things like deadlines and processes and procedures had been sort of ad hoc," he says.

Winebrake did not do this alone, Vernarelli notes. Instead he empowered department leaders to get involved and participate in the changes.

"He always tries to get people involved," Vernarelli says. "He's a very consensus-oriented guy."

Winebrake is able to reach a broad base of students in his position. Though RIT is largely seen as a technology-focused school, every technical degree requires students to take liberal arts courses.

As it offers these required courses, the college strives to meet the university's call for innovation in its course offerings, Winebrake says.

"Instead of just regular philosophy, students can take the philosophy of science," he says. "Instead of just ethics they can take computer ethics or bioethics. I use the term 'technology-infused liberal arts' to describe the offering."

But the college does more than just provide courses students need to complete degrees in other fields, Winebrake says. It has 18 different degree programs, from political science to museum studies—all with a technology twist.

"There's a whole panoply of degree students, so students are interested in political science, for instance, but we come to RIT for its technology focus," Winebrake says. "We offer degrees in these fields that are technologically infused. In the political science department, students can learn about the politics of information technology or biotechnology."

Interdisciplinary

Winebrake knows that for successful infusion of technology in other studies, the college needs the kind of

interdisciplinary cooperation that sometimes is elusive in higher education.

"It's not always easy," he admits. "Academia traditionally has its disciplinary silos, but we work very hard to try make connections, both formally and informally."

Formally, disciplines come together through curriculum projects to create interdisciplinary minors, Winebrake says. Things such as digital media literacy. This combines some classes in computing and new media and some in literature.

While these formal measures bring together professors and department leaders from different disciplines, more casual interactions also keep professors and researchers from different fields in touch.

"We have the faculty interact at research mixers, events where they can talk about different projects they're working on," Winebrake says.

It helps that the leadership cabinet at the university is dedicated to tearing down walls between disciplines, he says. President William Destler has made it a priority to focus on innovation, which gives greater leeway to faculty by encouraging them to reach beyond their disciplines to address pressing social issues.

"The president and provost and deans and chairs are very open to this kind of interdisciplinary work, and it seems like the faculty at RIT are willing to take risks and given the freedom to do that," Winebrake says.

That atmosphere is important, given the issues RIT is trying to address, he adds.

"Some of the most pressing problems we face, like climate change and environmental concerns and water quality, these won't be solved by any one discipline alone," Winebrake says. "The core of these problems is economic, political and societal, and you have to look at all of those dimensions when you address them."

The doctoral program in sustainability is a perfect example of this cooperation, he says. The program is the first in the world to focus on sustainable production systems, aiming to advance research and education in alternative energy development, sustainable production, sustainable mobility and eco-IT.

Students work with multidisciplinary faculty and researchers at the Golisano Institute for Sustainability.

"This program requires perspectives from a number of different disciplines," Winebrake says. "The dean of engineering is also proposing a new Ph.D. focused around problems, whether they be technological or communications or infrastructure or transportation. You'll see more colleges and universities taking this same approach in the future."

Future opportunities

Winebrake says he has seen a big change in the college over the past decade.

"Ten years or more ago, liberal arts didn't have many degrees," he says. "We were just providing a lot of general education courses for students there for other reasons, but there's been a dramatic shift since then. We're not offering more degrees now, but we're also becoming quite active in research."

Research at RIT is a big deal—to the tune of \$43.7 million in sponsored research funding in 2012—but liberal arts never played a big part in it, Winebrake says. Now there is a greater emphasis on taking on projects and there are more programs to get seed money to researchers.

The college possesses some unique research strengths, he notes. One researcher in criminal justice has teamed

with the Rochester Police Department and another with expertise in Native American languages and issues has sought funding in that area.

"On the whole we've been more active in writing proposals, and one of our major thrusts over the next five years is to increase our funded research opportunities," he says. "It's request or be damned out there, a really tough atmosphere."

Winebrake leads a college unique in its size at RIT. Though the department has 750 full-time students in its major or some 5 percent of the student body, it has one of the largest faculties, with close to 160 full-time members.

"A lot of faculty members are teaching courses used by other degrees and programs," Winebrake notes. "But for students within our degrees, it's quite a good scenario. The student-to-faculty ratio is something like 5-to-1, so you get a lot of attention and good opportunities to work with faculty."

Within the college, Winebrake tries to foster a culture of accessibility, with doors always open for students or professors. He also strives to create a welcoming atmosphere for underrepresented and international students.

"Our college has the modern languages department and also the international studies degree, so there has always been a strong emphasis on international education," says Winebrake, noting that these efforts dovetail with RIT efforts to boost international education.

The college also has competitive faculty, whether in seeking new collaborations or requesting grant funding, Haefner notes. This comes directly from Winebrake.

"He's a wonderful guy to work with and has a great sense of humor," Haefner says. "And he's also very competitive. At our annual deans' retreat we have a bocce ball tournament, and he was the winner. We know this year he's going to be looking to defend his title."

He enjoys other sporting pastimes as well. An avid fly fisherman, he goes after trout in Oatka Creek and recently made a fishing trip to the Delaware River.

Winebrake lives in Pittsford with his wife and their four children, whose activities he enjoys attending.

Within RIT, Winebrake looks forward to the future, encouraged by the niche the college has carved out.

"There's been a lot of concern about the future for small private liberal arts colleges, and some of these smaller mid-tier schools are facing real financial problems," he says. "I find it a blessing that we have that smaller school embedded in a larger university with a technological focus. It allows us to do things that others can't and open opportunities for us."

James Winebrake

Position: Dean, College of Liberal Arts, Rochester Institute of Technology

Age: 45

Education: B.S. in physics, Lafayette College, Easton, Pa., 1989; M.S. in technology and policy, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1991; Ph.D. in energy management and policy, University of Pennsylvania, 1994

Family: Wife Susan; children Jay, Deaven, Sam, Kate

Residence: Pittsford

Activities: Fishing, spending time with family

Quote: "Academia traditionally has its disciplinary silos, but we work very hard to try to make connections, both formally and informally."

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