Chronicle XXII: State of the University, 2012
Part III: Weill Hall
March 5, 2012

Last week, we posted Parts I and II of Chronicle XXII, which examines the financial state of Sonoma State University (SSU). Released in parts, Chronicle XXII covers the same ground as last year—the current budget crisis, the Student Center, Green Music Center (GMC), and Foundation. As always, our information comes from public records that are clearly referenced.

Parts I and II examined the evil twins of budget cuts and debt, the former courtesy of the State of California, the latter created by SSU’s decision-makers. While SSU’s State revenues decline other revenues increase. But these other revenues are pledged to debt and that debt is so large that a portion must also come from State revenues, compounding the problem. Debt drives enrollment to fill the dorms, over-enrollment means fewer classes to go around. State budget cuts mean fewer faculty to teach the increasing student population. And a lack of planning means erratic scheduling, closure of majors, fewer choices, and longer paths to graduation.

We ended with two questions: How can this cycle of debt, over-enrollment, and declining academics be broken? Or at least how can we prevent it from getting worse? Parking fees will increase to $5 a day in July 2012, but this is not a solution we had in mind (CRC, 12-2-11).

We are not the only ones concerned about SSU’s “rising debt”—the Press Democrat (3-4-12) devoted the front page of Sunday’s newspaper to this topic. The CFO downplayed its significance: “Our debt is really not our debt, the debt does not belong to Sonoma State, it belongs to the California State University.” Aside from the irresponsibility reflected in such a statement, it is only partly true. While the debt is held by the system and not SSU, SSU’s funds come from the Chancellor’s Office and the Chancellor can withhold funding for the campus’ bond debt reserve. The President may also raise mandatory campus fees without a “full alternative consultation process” in order to meet minimum debt service revenue requirements (EO 1054, Student Fee Policy).

Part III examines the GMC and how what should be a joyous opening has instead become just another cause for concern.

Green Music Center becomes Weill Hall

SSU breathed a collective sigh of relief when Joan and Sandy Weill stepped forward and donated $12 million for completion of the GMC in March 2011. The campus could finally move forward and forget/forgive old battles over what began as a modest $15 million project in 1997 and expanded to its current monumental $135 million. But was it the end and is the “battle” over? The Weills’ donation included $4 million for completion of the concert hall now named the Joan and Stanford I. Weill Hall, $4 million for landscaping an area now known as the Joan and Stanford I. Weill Commons, and $4 million for additional landscaping in an area now known as the Joan and Stanford I. Weill Lawn.

What they didn’t include in their donation was finishing the empty shell already named Schroeder’s Recital Hall in recognition of a $5 million donation from Jean Schulz. That will cost an additional $7
million to finish. The $4 million for the lawn is a matching grant. SSU’s Vice-President for Development pledged to raise the $4 million in new donations within three months (Press Democrat, 3-22-11). Seven months later, another $2 million-match still remained to complete Weill Lawn; the CFO stated the funds needed to be identified by Thanksgiving (CRC minutes, 10-28-11). A few weeks later the Vice President for Development announced her retirement. Construction has stopped on the lawn, so it appears the donors have yet to be identified. Weill Commons also looks a more ambitious project than a mere $4 million donation—“an amphitheater with a 10,000 seat capacity for large-scale events.” An architect is being selected for the “East Bowl” (CRC minutes, 12-2-11), a new project component reportedly in the $25 million range. Thus, despite a $12 million donation the rechristened GMC, now known as the Weill Project, needs another $36 million for completion.

SSU held an evening reception for donors at Prelude on New Year’s evening 2012. Here administrators announced Lang Lang as their performer for the September 29 opening and fundraised aggressively—“We know who you are,” said President Arminana, “and we know where you live.” Sandy Weill, new Chair of the GMC Board of Advisors, stated that another $1 million was needed to support the 2012-13 season and $3 million a year thereafter to underwrite the program (Press Democrat, 2 January 2012). Where will these funds come from? In some years, the Foundation takes in less than $3 million in total donations and until the Weills arrived GMC donations had been flat for some time.

Meanwhile, the roles and responsibilities changed for the GMC’s Board of Advisors. Members are now required to make three-year commitments and to contribute $50,000 each year (CRC minutes, 10-28-11). Presently, there are only six advisors; this is expected to increase to 30-40 members (CRC minutes, 12-2-11). Sadly, Weill Hall, Commons, and Lawn have transformed the GMC’s promise of the a “profoundly democratic institution, one that would bring students, faculty, and the community into a town hall environment with superb acoustics and aesthetics hosting music and ideas for a new age” (Ochoa in Press Democrat, 6-19-10) into a pay-to-play club for the truly privileged less than 1%. Even the new signage places local philanthropists in a visually secondary role. The more than 1800 individual contributors to this project should not be forgotten so easily.

But this is hardly unexpected. Former Citigroup CEO, Sandy Weill, helped engineer a deal in the late 1990s that some authoritative sources claim lead directly to the current mortgage crisis. According to Bill Moyers’ Moyers and Company PBS show:

“There’s no clearer example of the collusion between government and corporate finance than the Citicorp-Travelers merger, which — thanks to the removal of Glass-Steagall — enabled the formation of the financial behemoth known as Citigroup. But even behemoths are vulnerable; when the meltdown hit, the bank cut more than 50,000 jobs, and the taxpayers shelled out more than $45 billion to save it” (http://billmoyers.com/episode/full-show-how-big-banks-are-rewriting-the-rules-of-our-economy/).

Yet Weill had walked away in 2003 a multi-billionaire.

And what of the local music lovers and philanthropists? We have it on numerous and good authorities that the unthinkable has happened: the Greens are no longer associated with the Green Music Center. The Foundation has turned down or returned their recent donations and they are no longer represented on the advisory board. How is this possible? The Greens are universally liked and respected for their quiet dignity and humanitarianism. Has SSU dumped the millionaires for a billionaire?