

## History of the University of Hartford

Now in its sixth decade, the University of Hartford sits proudly on a 350-acre campus that once stood as the city of Hartford's last working farm.

The University began as a commuter school during the post-World War II boom when returning soldiers were looking for an education financed by the G.I. Bill®. The movers and shakers of Hartford recognized a need for a university and brought together three small schools housed in buildings spread across the city, including the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art and the Hartford YMCA.

Unlike most private New England colleges, the University of Hartford did not begin as a small liberal arts institution. From the outset, it has offered courses in electronics, engineering, technology, and education along with strong programs in music, the visual arts, and the arts and sciences. Today, it is known for excellence in the visual and performing arts, engineering, and business; small classes; and its focus on mentoring all students.

The University has always been coed and open to all students, regardless of their background. Designed initially to meet the needs of Hartford residents, it has stayed true to the founders' ideals but greatly surpassed its modest goals. Its mission today is to educate students as citizens of the world, encouraging them to study abroad, get involved in community service, and take responsibility for the planet and their futures.

From the time that then Governor Abraham Ribicoff signed the bill granting the University of Hartford its charter in February 1957, visionary leaders have guided the institution. Vincent Brown Coffin, a well-known and influential insurance executive, was named the first chancellor of the University in 1958. Archibald Woodruff followed in 1967, and his title was changed to president in 1970. Stephen Joel Trachtenberg took up the mantle in 1977, followed by Humphrey Tonkin in 1989 and Walter Harrison in 1998. Each administration has carefully guided the University and helped it adapt to changing times while keeping it on course financially and academically.

## The Early Years

The University's roots go back to 1877 when one of the three founding schools, the Hartford Art School, opened. It was initially called the Hartford School for Decorative Arts, and was founded by prominent Hartford women Olivia Clemens, Elizabeth Colt, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mary Bushnell Cheney, and Susan Warner.

Two music educators, Moshe Paranov and Julius Hartt, established the second founding school, the Hartt School of Music, now called The Hartt School.

A Civil War general named Charles Tudor Hillyer began classes at the YMCA in Hartford in what would become the original Hillyer College. In 1952, Samuel I. Ward gave Hillyer College the Ward School of Electronics, an electronics school to train technicians for a brand new industry at the time—television. The school is now part of the College of Engineering, Technology, and Architecture.

With backing and encouragement from local community and business leaders, the schools came together in 1957 on a 150-acre stretch of farmland on Bloomfield Avenue known as the Gabriel farm, the last farm in Hartford. A new university had been born.

Despite the founders' differences in subject matter and teaching styles, they all believed in the importance of education and were dedicated to making it available to all, a commitment that still stands today.

When Martin Luther King Jr. came to Hartford in 1959 as a speaker in a new University lecture series, the campus did not have an auditorium yet. Instead, he delivered his speech, "The Future of Integration," at Hartford's Bushnell Memorial Hall. He met informally with students during the day and recalled a summer spent working in Connecticut in the nearby tobacco fields.

The first academic building, University Hall, later named Hillyer Hall, opened in 1960. In 1963 and 1964, The Hartt School and the Hartford Art School moved into their respective buildings on campus. By the early 1960's, the University was already considering expanding its reach beyond Hartford. But students who lived further away needed housing.

The first residence halls opened on the residential side of campus in 1967, followed by a student union and athletics facilities. A library and new cafeteria, University Commons, opened in 1971. Students soon learned the joys of sledding down snowy campus slopes on food trays.

As the student body grew, more buildings sprang up on campus. From the original Hillyer College came the forerunners of today's College of Arts and Sciences, the Barney School of Business, the College of Education, Nursing and Health Professions, and the College of Engineering, Technology, and Architecture.

Early honorary degree recipients at the new University included African American contralto Marian Anderson, composer Aaron Copland, and poet Wallace Stevens, a Hartford resident.

## **The Boom of the 1980s**

The 1980's were a time of expansion for the University—as it was for the rest of the country. Enrollment grew and, under the impressive fundraising skills of President Trachtenberg, several new building projects began. United Technologies Hall, the Beatrice Fox Auerbach Computer and Administration Center, the Konover Campus Center, and the Harry Jack Gray Center all broke ground during this period, along with a trio of residential housing additions: the Village Apartments, Regents Park, and the Park River Apartments.

While Trachtenberg was at the helm, economist Franco Modigliani, musician Benny Goodman, author William Styron, world figures Jihan Sadat and Elie Wiesel, playwright Tennessee Williams, and comedian George Burns were among those who came to campus to receive honorary degrees.

On the academic side, Trachtenberg strengthened requirements for faculty and implemented the All-University Curriculum, a cross-disciplinary learning program for undergraduates. He also helped launch the doctoral program in psychology and laid the groundwork for expanding into health-related fields that became part of today's College of Education, Nursing and Health Professions.

Together with then University Secretary Charles Condon, he helped establish the John G. Martin scholarship, which provides a graduating senior each year the opportunity to spend two years at the University of Oxford in England, studying for a master's degree in Hertford College.

At the same time, the athletics program grew. In 1984, athletics moved to Division I in search of a national and more competitive schedule and higher visibility for the University. The Hawks were accepted into the ECAC North Atlantic Conference, which later became the America East. The University would continue its proud athletics history in the ensuing years, producing all-stars in both Major League Baseball (Jeff Bagwell) and the National Basketball Association (Vin Baker); three golfers who competed on the PGA Tour (Jerry Kelly, Tim Petrovic, and Patrick Sheehan); and a National Lacrosse League Rookie of the Year (Tracey Kelusky).

## **The Challenges of the 1990s**

Colleges and universities nationwide—and most especially in the Northeast—were met with a variety of obstacles as the new decade of the 1990's began—recession, a sharp drop in the college-age population, and widespread job layoffs affecting the financial resources of many families. Competition between schools and colleges intensified.

The Board of Regents decided in 1989 to make the University international. Global communities and international business were on the horizon. Tonkin, who was British by birth, launched his presidency with a conference of about 50 university leaders from North America and Europe to highlight the importance of international connections and set an intellectual tone for the new administration.

Tonkin also oversaw the implementation of several programs that reached out to the Hartford community. He started Educational Main Street (EMS) that placed UHart students at nearby Weaver High School, the Annie Fisher Elementary School, and other City schools as tutors. The hope was that program would encourage Hartford students to stay in school and graduate. The program continues today with the addition of an after-school network that provides programs for students in grades K through 11.

At the same time, the Hartford Scholars program began. The program offers half-tuition scholarships to students who live in Hartford and graduate from Hartford public high schools or from suburban high schools that participate in Project Choice, a state program to improve diversity in suburban schools. Since its inception, more than 400 students have graduated from the University as Hartford Scholars.

Tonkin also worked with city and state leaders to plan a magnet elementary school on campus that would be linked with the University. The University of Hartford Magnet School for children in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade opened its doors on the southern end of campus in 2001 during Harrison's administration.

During Tonkin's administration, there were changes to the academic programs as well. In 1991, the University began an architectural engineering program, which became a popular major. Master's degree programs were launched in engineering and doctoral programs began in music education and educational leadership. New programs in occupational and physical therapy also attracted many students. The Hartt School began offering Bachelor of Fine Arts degrees in dance and theatre, and the Department of Communication was given quasi-collegiate standing, becoming the School of Communication.

Also during Tonkin's presidency, Hartford College for Women merged with the University of Hartford. That college began in 1933 at the Hartford YMCA, and later moved to Asylum Avenue to occupy the 13-acre property purchased and donated to the college by Paul Butterworth, father of children's author, Oliver Butterworth.

In the 1990's, tennis champion and AIDS activist Arthur Ashe, astronomer Carl Sagan, explorer Thor Heyerdahl, actor Hal Holbrook, and abstract painter Jules Olitski were among those who received honorary doctorates.

## **The 21st Century Begins**

The University stepped into the 21st century with a new president in Walter Harrison, who quickly built rapport with students, has helped to transform UHart with a fundraising campaign that ushered in new buildings and programs along with a new campus spirit.

Harrison's fundraising campaign raised more than \$175 million, paving the way for new buildings, studios, and athletic facilities as well as scholarships, endowed chairs, and faculty research.

The campaign allowed him to pursue a new aspiration for the University—to achieve regional prominence and national visibility in the sciences, engineering, and technology. In keeping with this goal, the first building project connected to the fundraising campaign was the new Integrated Science, Engineering, and Technology Complex.

UHart also built a new arts and technology complex at the Hartford Art School and a new dormitory, Hawk Hall, and its adjacent gathering place, Alumni Plaza. The two-story Renée Samuels Center at HAS provides a fresh facade for Taub Hall and studios for media arts and photography.

In 2008, at the site of a historic Hartford car dealership designed 80 years earlier by pioneering industrial designer Albert Kahn, the Mort and Irma Handel Performing Arts Center opened. This 55,000 square foot state-of-the art facility has five dance studios, four theatre rehearsal studios, three vocal studios, and two black box theaters, and has become a vibrant new center for dance and theatre instruction and performances at one of the key gateways to the city of Hartford.

The campaign also allowed the University to build its first on-campus baseball field and a new softball field, and to renovate the soccer and lacrosse facility.

The University also opened another public school on its campus--the University High School of Science and Engineering --through another partnership between UHart and Hartford Public Schools. The high school initially opened temporarily at the former Hartford College of Women campus then moved into its new building on the UHart campus in 2009.

Also during Harrison's tenure, the University administration announced that it would close Hartford College for Women, and in 2006, the University established the Women's Education and Leadership Fund (later renamed The Women's Advancement Initiative) to continue the traditions of HCW, namely to enhance the education of women; empower women to lead; promote women as scholars; and enrich the campus community and beyond. The fund provides scholarships for students and research grants for students, staff, and faculty.

More recently (2012), Hillyer Hall, the University's oldest classroom building, received a facelift and expansion through the addition of the 10,000-square-foot Shaw Center. The dedicated home of Hillyer College, the Shaw Center added faculty offices, new classroom space, seminar and conference rooms, and a large gathering space named Regents Commons. UHart lore has it that every student takes at least one course that meets in Hillyer Hall during their college career.

Shortly after Harrison arrived, the University opened a Center for Community Service that initially focused on recruiting students to volunteer in the surrounding Greater Hartford community. The Center soon expanded its scope and began to send students on Alternative Spring Break trips with Habitat for Humanity to build houses in Raleigh, N.C. Students have continued to give up the traditional sun and sand of spring break to help neighborhoods in Louisiana and Biloxi clean up in the wake of hurricanes. The center has also coordinated various student efforts to raise more than \$9,000 for earthquake relief in Haiti in 2010.

Closer to home, the University started a Day of Service called "Hawks Helping Hartford," which was organized by the center and the Student Government Association. The center maintains a website to connect volunteers with agencies and also works with professors to develop service learning opportunities.

Harrison also brought new college traditions to the University. With help from The Hartt School, he introduced a new fight song, an alma mater, and a pep band.

Many celebrities, heads of state, and founders of modern industry visited campus in the first quarter of the new century, including President Barack Obama, who came in 2013 to speak

to students, faculty, and the families of those killed in the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings in nearby Newtown, Conn.

## **The Latest Decade**

In June 2017, Harrison retired as the longest serving president in University history (19 years). Gregory Woodward became the University of Hartford's sixth president.

Under Woodward's leadership, the University of Hartford launched 16 new and in-demand academic programs, including nursing, aerospace engineering, business analytics, robotics, data science, occupational therapy (MA), computer science (MA), and digital media and journalism. UHart has increased online offerings and created new ventures in corporate programming, professional certificates, and combined or accelerated degree programs.

Stressing from day one on campus the importance of seeing each and every student who enrolls at UHart graduate, Woodward guided a re-dedicated and holistic commitment to the success of all students. The Center for Student Success opened in 2019, a new space centralizing support services and providing a home for professional academic advisors for all first-year and transfer students. The efforts contributed to record increases in retention rates the first year, including a 16% increase for students of color.

Opened in fall 2021, the 60,000-square-foot Francis X. and Nancy Hursey Center for Advanced Engineering and Health Professions has transformed campus and will meet the needs of high-caliber students—and will serve as a feeder of in-demand students for local employers—for years to come. The building's specialized and technology-rich facilities are getting rave reviews from both students and industry leaders.

Woodward also focused on enhancing the physical appearance of campus, spearheading an additional \$47.5 million in capital improvements, including an expansion of the Barney School of Business and notable renovations to Millard Auditorium in The Hartt School and Gengras Student Union. The Village Apartments, home to more than 800 UHart students, were completely remodeled in summer 2022.

During this time, the University of Hartford transitioned its athletics program to an NCAA Division III classification, better aligning its athletics offerings with the institution's mission and goals, increasing opportunities for more student-athletes, and offering more robust recreation and wellness programming for all students.

Woodward guided the development and launch of UHart Start—the University's five-year strategic action plan established to guide UHart's prioritized actions to transform the institution, ensure excellence, and sustain success. He has also

helped the University raise more than \$75 million in impactful fundraising—including the largest gift from an alumnus in the University's history—and form many new, strategic partnerships.

Woodward retired at the conclusion of the 2022–23 academic year. Stephen Mulready M'77, who had been serving as dean of the Barney School of Business and who has been engaged with the University for decades, was appointed acting University president. He guided UHart through June 2024 as the campus community awaited its next leader.

Lawrence P. Ward became the University of Hartford's seventh president on July 1, 2024—and is now in the beginning stages of helping to write the next chapter of the institution's remarkable history.