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Insight into Diversity profile - June 2013

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Winthrop University President Anthony DiGiorgio Steps Down

By Lenore Pearlstein

Anthony DiGiorgio, PhD, will retire this summer after serving 24 years at the helm of Winthrop University in South Carolina. He has the distinction of being the longest-serving president of any public university in the state.

The son of an immigrant bricklayer, DiGiorgio was born in Pennsylvania. "My father had third grade education and my mother had sixth grade education," he says. "By any rights, just in terms of an educational background, if I had completed high school and had a good factory job it would have been a real step up in the economic and social realm."

DiGiorgio received his undergraduate degree at Gannon College and his master's and doctoral degrees from Purdue University. He began his career in education in 1963 as a high school teacher in New Jersey. He then became an instructor and assistant to the dean of humanities, social science and education at Purdue University. Later, he moved on to the College of New Jersey where he served in a number of positions over a 19-year period.

"When I go someplace I like to stay and put down roots; I like to build and grow," he says. "I took the position at Winthrop in 1989. It was my first and only presidency. I joke, given the length of presidencies in the public sector these days, it's really my fourth presidency, I've just done them all in one place."

DiGiorgio joined the University during what he remembers as tumultuous times, primarily because he was the seventh person in nine years to hold the position. As a result, the campus was plagued by infrastructure problems, a lack of funding initiatives, and an overall lack of vision, he says.

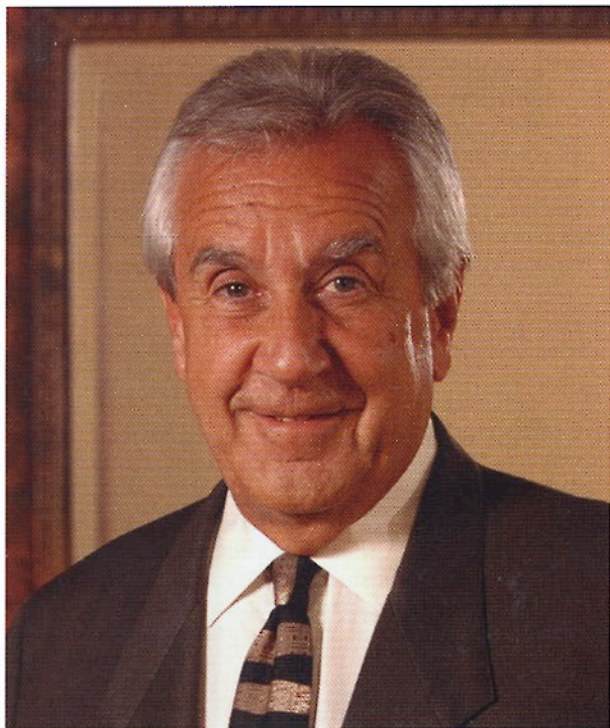
"It was a lot of stopping and starting. There were good intentions, but the campus community was not holding hands and singing kumbayah at that point in time," he says. "Winthrop had fallen into a sort of survival mode and that found its way to admissions. It had positioned itself as a second-class alternative – if you couldn't get into your first place, you might think about coming to Winthrop. That simply didn't fit its nature, its character, or its history," DiGiorgio says.

More than 20 years ago, he helped to craft the University's Vision of Distinction, both a plan and a process, that sets out six overarching institutional goals, including fairness and equitable treatment for all constituents.

In 1989, at the beginning of his tenure, minority enrollment stood at 9 percent, whereas today it has grown more than threefold to 32 percent, including a 27 percent African American student population. Combined with other outreach strategies, he played a personal role in achieving this success by becoming more visible in the community. He attended career fairs, and often visited local high schools and churches. "Our goal was to match the overall diversity of the state of South Carolina within our student body. We've been able to fundamentally do that," DiGiorgio says.

Along with a culturally diverse student body, he sought to increase the numbers of students who are also high achievers and socially responsible. Although he was told seeking all three characteristics at once was unrealistic, data shows that the campus has succeeded in all of those areas, DiGiorgio says.

The retiring campus leader points with pride to other significant milestones during his tenure, including the conversion of Winthrop from college to university status. He also initiated the



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President, Winthrop University

university's successful drive to achieve 100 percent national accreditation in all eligible programs.

DiGiorgio is also proud of Winthrop's recognition by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation as one of 40 U.S. campuses where minority students excel at "Beating the Odds" against degree completion. "You can recruit a lot of students, but unless you find a constructive way to help them get through and graduate, it's not necessarily a success," he says.

As President Emeritus, DiGiorgio will take a one-year sabbatical, after which he will return to Winthrop as Distinguished Professor of Public Service and Leadership. The latter position will enable him to take on a guiding role in the namesake DiGiorgio Forum on Leadership at Winthrop. Recently created by the Division of Academic Affairs, the DiGiorgio Forum will support members of the campus community in becoming effective and ethical leaders through workshops, one-on-one mentoring, and other programs to enhance leadership skills. ●

Lenore Pearlstein is a co-publisher of *INSIGHT Into Diversity* magazine.