Building strong leaders

Lawrence Tech emphasizes growth

BY LORI HIGGINS
FREE PRESS EDUCATION WRITER

A new, environmentally-conscious student services center just opened on campus. A fund-raising campaign ended last month nearly $27 million above initial goals. And a number of new academic programs were added in recent years.

Now, Lawrence Technological University in Southfield has new leadership.

But Lewis Walker is no stranger to the private university of 5,000 students, though on Saturday he became the sixth president and chief executive officer. Walker, 61, has served as provost since 1994 and has been acting president since February, when former President Charles Chambers stepped down. Walker’s formal appointment was made last week.

“It will mean some very different things for me. I’m very much looking forward to the new opportunity and challenge,” said Walker, who holds three degrees, including a doctorate in electrical engineering from the University of Missouri-Columbia.

His history puts him in a unique position to capitalize on the university’s past while positioning it for the future.

“We hope we continue our success. Dr. Walker is the right person to lead us,” said Maria Vaz, who came to the university in 1994 as a physics professor and was appointed provost on Saturday. She was previously associate provost.

She said Walker is a straightforward, approachable leader.

“He’s a person who is always trying to see the perspective of others,” Vaz said.

Among the college’s longstanding goals is to produce strong leaders. Beginning in the fall, a stronger emphasis will be placed on leadership through a university seminar freshmen take, a sophomore leadership course and through efforts to get students involved in community service.

“We want to be seen as producing the leaders of tomorrow,” Walker said.

Vaz said the leadership emphasis is important because students graduating from the university will need to be strong in their specialty and as leaders.

Lewis Walker, the new president of Lawrence Technological University, left, talks with Nabil Grace, civil engineering chairman at the university, in a building under construction, for defense-related research.

One of the university’s lab experiments involves testing a carbon fiber rod for use in designing a longer-lasting bridge system.

“Our students need to be more than just good engineers,” she said.

Lawrence Tech’s architectural program is the fifth largest in the country. Nearly half of the architects licensed in Michigan graduated from the university. Walker said the vision now is to be a national leader for architectural education, and to boost programs in rising fields like biomedical engineering.

He also wants to build on an automotive engineering program, partnering with universities in China and India in the future.

Among the university’s chief recent accomplishments is the conclusion of a campaign June 30 that had an initial goal to raise $20 million. Walker expects that when everything is added up, the university will have raised more than $47 million.

That campaign helped build the $13.9 million, 42,000-square-foot A. Alfred Taubman Student Services Center, which was dedicated in April. The building brings together key functions like financial aid and career counseling in one building.

“It helps set the tone, both with our students and with our faculty, in how we want to serve,” Walker said.

Contact LORI HIGGINS at 248-351-3894 or lhiggins@freepress.com.