

# Institutional resilience: How three local universities survived the pandemic

By: Caurie Putnam February 15, 2023

Next month will be the three year anniversary of New York State going into lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In advance of this mile marker, we asked the presidents of three Rochester area universities to reflect upon the term *institutional resilience* – what it means to them and how they’ve seen it in action on their campuses over the past three years.

## Nazareth: Ingenuity kept us moving forward

To define institutional resiliency, Dr. Elizabeth Paul, the president of [Nazareth College](#) (slated to become Nazareth University on June 1, 2023), needed only to look back at the institution’s beginnings. The school was founded in 1924 by five Sisters of St. Joseph as Nazareth College. The first student body was made up of 25 students — all women — a population that was underserved in higher education at the time.

“Our founders defined institutional resilience for us as adapting with the times,” said Paul, who is the institution’s 10<sup>th</sup> president. “For us, resilience is adapting to the current challenges and being a pathway for changemakers.” Paul took the realms of Nazareth (which is now co-educational and legally independent of the religious congregation) on July 1, 2020 — just a few months into the COVID-19 pandemic. She is proud of how the school’s students, faculty, staff, and alumni have shown resiliency in action over the past three years.

“What this community showed during the early part of the pandemic was that they’d do anything to keep things going,” Paul said. “The real mainstay of what we do here at Nazareth University is experiential learning and the pandemic didn’t make the need for that impact go away.”

Many of these experiential learning opportunities directly impact people in the community, such as the school’s on-site art therapy clinic.

When the lockdown happened, students and staff worked tirelessly and creatively to keep art therapy going for clients in the community. There were online sessions and, when permitted, in-person sessions with safety protocols in place.

“We have people in the community who count on our clinics and to stop would have been catastrophic,” Paul said.

“Ingenuity kept us moving forward.”



Dr. Elizabeth Paul

## Roberts Wesleyan University: The hope of something greater prevailed

At Roberts Wesleyan University, “Institutional resiliency has come through 157 years of history,” said Dr. Deana L. Porterfield, who is the 11th President of the institution that was the first educational establishment affiliated with the Free Methodists in the United States. “Our history has shown us lots of crisis situations, including times of economic downturn, a fire, and even a tornado.”

When the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic began Porterfield, who has served the university and its seminary as president since 2014, started keeping a journal. Every day, for quite some time, she’d write down a new mandate imposed by the state.

“It felt hopeless at first when everything stopped,” Porterfield said. “But the hope of something greater prevailed: A courageous optimism which is part of the DNA of this campus.” Students, faculty, staff, and alumni of the university rose to the occasion she said, not just for themselves but for the greater Rochester community.

“Resiliency is more than personal resiliency,” she said. “It’s about elevating, lifting up and influencing the community so that all people can flourish.”

A tangible example of the school’s resilience for the benefit of the community is its \$13.9 million Golisano Community Engagement Center that opened in January 2023. The 26,167-square-foot building provides a centralized space for both students and the community to gather and interact.

Roberts Wesleyan announced plans for the facility in 2019, following a \$7.5 million naming gift from community philanthropist and entrepreneur Tom Golisano. The remaining capital to support the completion of the building was funded by major donors, partners, and alumni through the university’s \$15 million Connect the Community campaign.

Due to the pandemic, the school didn’t break ground on the project until 2021 — about a year later than originally planned. “The vision of that building was some of the motivation that moved us forward,” Porterfield said.



Dr. Deana L. Porterfield

## **St. John Fisher University: To both sustain and strengthen**

Dr. Gerard J. Rooney, who took office in July 2015 as the seventh president of St. John Fisher University, defines resilience as:

*The ability to do whatever is necessary, when needed, to both sustain and strengthen an institution through periods of adversity, disruption, and crisis. Institutional resilience is only possible with the resilience of the people who comprise the organization and their creativity, flexibility, and dedicated commitment and service in addressing and overcoming whatever circumstances they may be facing.*

He notes the university's ability to quickly and successfully respond to immediate and ongoing challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic has been due to prior planning and institutional investment, decentralized decision-making, and a leadership team focus on empowering and activating the full potential and talents of as many members of the campus community as possible.

One example of resiliency at an institutional level was the implementation and evolution of iFisher: Next Generation Learning Initiative, which has enhanced, innovated, and transformed the teaching and learning experience for faculty and students in many ways. It also led the university to be named an Apple Distinguished School.

"This is work that was underway before the pandemic began, and our institutional commitment and resilience ensured that nothing would get in the way of our progress, and in hindsight, prepared us for the shift to virtual learning at the beginning of the pandemic, as well as the remote instruction and hybrid learning scenarios that followed," Rooney said. The university is also proud of the many Fisher faculty and students who served on the front lines to help the greater Rochester community during the pandemic, as well on campus, serving at test sites or community vaccine clinics throughout the region.

Additionally, Rooney is proud of the progress made around the school's comprehensive fundraising campaign, Fisher Forward. In September 2019 the school launched the public phase of the campaign and announced a goal of \$75 million by May 2023.

"We exceeded the \$75 million goal in December 2021 and have now increased our goal to \$100 million," Rooney said. "During the pandemic we moved quickly to build online engagement programs to maintain alumni focus on Fisher. These programs were successful in inspiring philanthropy including several \$1 million plus gifts that supported our strategic priorities."



Dr. Gerard J. Rooney