North Park University: For More Than 125 years, a Chicago-centered University with Deep Christian Roots

University focuses on preparing diverse student body with innovative programs in a competitive college environment

Since 1894 -- before the city around it was even there -- North Park University has been an anchor of Christian higher education in northwest Chicago. Today, the university’s president, Mary K. Surridge, sees the school emerging as the model for Christian higher education in 21st Century America.

"Three distinctive characteristics help distinguish us from other universities," Surridge says. "We’re distinguished by our Christian identity and deeply rooted in faith. Second, we are centered in this world-class city of Chicago, a competitive advantage with opportunities that are limitless for education and career development. And third, we are distinguished and blessed by the rich tapestry of a thoroughly intercultural student community. Our student population has no majority group and identifies as nearly 50 percent students of color. That is a strength for us that is unparalleled."

"In my view," Surridge says, "one of our Christian imperatives is that we prepare an intercultural, diverse student body to serve in the city -- that we help students find their calling and equip them to use their vocational gifts for a better world."

About one year ago, when she began her new role as North Park University’s 10th president, Surridge knew she would be doing a lot of listening – listening to students, faculty, staff, trustees and a variety of other stakeholders. The university had been in transition for a while. The former president retired, an interim president served one year, and key staff leadership positions were open and needed to be filled.

To help guide her initial work as president, Surridge centered her leadership on what she refers to as "The
Four Rs:” Respect for mission and legacy of the institution, and the authority of the board of trustees. Resource generation in enrollment and advancement that helps the university succeed. Responsibilities each employee bears and the results that must accompany those responsibilities. And, relationships that are important for success with students, faculty, alumni and friends, the Evangelical Covenant Church (North Park University's founding denomination), the City of Chicago and other institutions.

"There's a high volume of work," Surridge says. "The strength of our team and the strength of our mission continues to be the 'true north.' We have to draw energy from our faith and our commitment to that mission every day."

Surridge brings to the presidency a wealth of leadership experiences in higher education, including athletics. She served as vice president for advancement and also oversaw undergraduate enrollment at North Park. As advancement VP, Surridge led Campaign North Park which raised $63 million in financial commitments, including $41 million for construction of the Nancy and G. Timothy Johnson Center for Science and Community Life, opened in 2014. She was associate director of planned and major gifts at Northwestern University, dean of students at Marian College (now Marian University) and director of residence life and student activities at Concordia University Wisconsin. At Concordia, she earned a master’s degree in student personnel administration.

As an undergraduate at Northwestern, Surridge played Division I basketball and earned a bachelor's degree in speech communication. Her sports and communications background led to internship experiences in professional sports. With the Chicago White Sox, she helped with fan requests, marketing and promotions, game broadcasts and other duties. She also worked in the front office of the Milwaukee Bucks, working for the head coach and in promotions.

"I draw on every single one of those experiences," she says. "Athletics, enrollment and recruiting, plus advancement, student affairs and student development work are all very important pieces for the future of higher education."
North Park a longtime presence in northwest Chicago
North Park University was founded in Minnesota in 1891 by Swedish immigrants and moved in 1894 to its present location in Chicago’s North Park and Albany Park neighborhoods. In 1997, it became a university with North Park Theological Seminary. Today, about 3,200 undergraduate and graduate students are enrolled. The university has more than 40 undergraduate majors, plus graduate and continuing education programs in business and nonprofit management, education, music, art and theater, nursing and health sciences, and theology. It has a degree-completion program for adults and significant online educational programs for undergraduate and graduate students. The university consistently ranks in the top tier of Midwest regional universities in U.S. News & World Report rankings, and it is among the top 50 Christian colleges and universities by collegechoice.net. It also has a long tradition of Fulbright award-winning students and faculty.

Enrollment is stable at North Park, Surridge says. She attributes that to the university’s distinguishing characteristics, hard work in recruitment and relationships of university faculty, staff and alumni with students. "It's a team effort at North Park. It's an all-in effort, and we have promoted that across the campus. Recruitment is everybody's business," she says.

Johnson Center helps North Park's academic programs in health sciences
Through its School of Nursing and Health Sciences, North Park is known for academic programs in nursing, athletic training, exercise science and physical education. Its nursing program offers bachelor's and master's degrees, plus a recently added online doctoral program in nursing practice. The university also added a master's degree in athletic training. Programs in biological and physical sciences were enhanced with the completion of the Johnson Center for Science and Community Life, named for Nancy and G. Timothy Johnson, both North Park alumni. Nancy Johnson took science courses at North Park while training as a nurse at Swedish Covenant Hospital School of Nursing. Timothy Johnson ("Dr. Tim") earned two degrees at North Park and went on to a long career as chief medical editor for ABC News. He continues to lecture annually at North Park and meets with medical school prospects.
With the opening of the Johnson Center, the university has maintained a Summer Science Academy for high school students interested in science education and research. A combined Physics and Engineering Department was born, and the university won a $650,000 National Science Foundation grant to fund 20 scholarships and support a variety of academic and project-based activities for science and engineering students.

Like many presidents, Surridge has concerns about the future of higher education. One is the cost of a college degree. Another is speculation about the value of a degree. "That is a concern for all of us. I think keeping higher education affordable so that it can be accessible is top of mind for everyone," she says. In fact, in 2007, North Park lowered its tuition costs to more a realistic level, and the costs remain competitive today. Other concerns, says Surridge, are meeting students' growing needs, compensation and career development for faculty and staff, and campus safety.

**Covenant Church connection vital and innovative programs emerge**

Key to the university's identity is its affiliation with the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC). Though the student body is made up of a variety of faith backgrounds, enrollment of ECC-affiliated students is up. "Most of that is because we have focused on some very concerted efforts in recruiting those students," says Surridge. Her report of the increase was warmly greeted this summer at the ECC's Annual Meeting in Omaha, Nebraska. The church's efforts in faith development and education of young people have helped North Park build relationships with students in the denomination and recruit them when they reach college. One university recruiter is dedicated to ECC students exclusively, Surridge says.

A unique part of the university is North Park Theological Seminary, offering graduate theological education. The ECC seminary has been innovative with new programs, Surridge says, including a program called "Ignite," which offers student cohorts a chance to learn from seminary professors in intensive, in-person programs in different parts of the country. Tuition costs are shared among the seminary, church conferences, local churches and the students. Next year, the first set of Ignite students will graduate.

A second program is called the School of Restorative Arts. Developed by Dr. Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom, director of the school, the program offers seminary education at Stateville Correctional Center, Cedar Hill, Illinois. It brings together seminary students, undergraduate students and incarcerated students who study together at the prison. The program is funded by grants and outside gifts, and it is intended to help the full range of students pursue and complete seminary degrees.

"The School of Restorative Arts is life-changing and culture-changing," Surridge says. "The Illinois Department of Corrections and the Stateville staff have smoothed the way to make North Park welcome." For example, this past fall, after North Park's opening student convocation in Chicago, students, faculty and staff went to Stateville to host a student convocation there for their 40 students, Surridge says.
Continuing success in athletics and on campus
North Park has enjoyed success in NCAA Division III athletics. In the past 20 years, its women's and men's teams won eight College Conference of Illinois and Wisconsin (CCIW) titles, including a national runner-up finish in men's soccer in 2017. This year, 56 student-athletes were named CCIW Academic All-College.

With ACI, North Park University's involvement dates back to the organization's beginnings in 1952 when it was one of 22 charter members. It remains as one of the founding campuses in ACI's Peer Mentoring Program, which now has 11 institutions, and its students benefit from ACI scholarships.

Recently, the university completed a significant renovation project at Hanson Hall, home of the newly merged School of Music, Art and Theatre. The project included renovations to the building's interior as well as practice rooms and faculty studios. A second project at Nyvall Hall, home of North Park Theological Seminary, includes refurbishing a lounge, kitchen and equipment, plus creating a ministry lab. Though physical improvements are helpful, Surridge says more and more schools are working on program development, including new models of teaching and new collaborations.

"I think we have a sound offering at North Park," Surridge says, adding that she deeply respects other presidents and institutions within the ACI family, all of whom are working in the best interests of their students. But for Surridge, North Park is a special place.

"North Park University has never been more relevant, more vibrant and more imperative than it is today," she says. "We are a distinctively Christian university of high academic quality in the world-class city of Chicago, serving a bright and talented intercultural student population. We have to come through on behalf of our students. They are counting on us. I am constantly inviting our alumni and friends to join us in this effort. They know that someone came through for them when they were students. And now, we must do the same and more. We must make sure that North Park remains strong, relevant and vibrant in the college marketplace. It's an extremely important mission, and we have to be the ones to deliver it now – in a more challenging time than we've seen in the recent past."