

# CONNECTICUT BUILDS

## How One Public University Became a National Model for Infrastructure Investment

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**B**illion-dollar investments in public higher education don't come easily in the State of Connecticut—or anywhere in New England. So, when in 1995, Connecticut Gov. John Rowland and the state's General Assembly approved the \$1 billion comprehensive infrastructure improvement and private support incentive program known as UConn 2000, this was something bordering on the revolutionary.

Looking back after seven years of dramatic transformation, it seems as if the arguments for the initiative were so compelling that they almost made themselves. But it wasn't that simple. It took courage on the part of our elected leaders, advocacy by alumni and thousands of other concerned citizens, leadership by a committed board of trustees and quite likely the prominence of our basketball programs—including our women's basketball team's NCAA national championship—to build the political support needed to make this investment.

At the heart of the issue was a compelling need. The recessions of the early 1980s and early 1990s severely impacted Connecticut, leading to cycles of budget rescissions and endlessly “deferred” maintenance. Our main library was literally falling apart, covered in plastic wrapping to keep bricks from falling on passersby. Classrooms were in a state of disrepair. The condition of residence halls ranged from barely adequate to abysmal. Departments would try to keep candidates for faculty jobs from seeing laboratory facilities until the last possible moment for fear that the sorry condition of the labs would drive away applicants. It didn't always work.

But by the mid 1990s, another dynamic was emerging. The earlier recessions hastened Connecticut's transformation to a postindustrial, knowledge-based economy. For Connecticut to retain existing businesses and attract new firms, it clearly needed a public university equipped to prepare a highly skilled professional workforce and to stem a “brain drain” that had seen a higher proportion of high school graduates leave Connecticut for college than any other state except Alaska.



UConn's new South Campus and Hilltop Suites feature four-person suites and a shared living area. Students in particular majors may live and study near one another in academic clusters if they choose. Photo courtesy of University of Connecticut.

Members of Connecticut's baby boom generation, now sending their own children to college, were searching for value—a reasonably-priced, high-quality alternative to expensive private institutions or out-of-state colleges that were increasingly out of the reach of middle-income Connecticut families.

The media caught on to the story of UConn's dilapidated facilities, which helped generate support from public-spirited citizens with nothing to gain but an enhanced sense of pride in their state's public institutions. Thus, in June 1995, the General Assembly approved UConn 2000, providing approximately \$1 billion for a 10-year construction program and committing up to \$20 million (subsequently increased by a total of \$167.5 million) in state funds to match the private support that would, it was believed, be a natural outgrowth of the university's move forward.

Notably, UConn 2000 gave the university the authority to implement the rebuilding program independently, with the concomitant responsibility to manage, prioritize and sequence projects. The

anticipation, now borne out by experience, was that this autonomy would be a key factor in ensuring timeliness and cost-effectiveness.

A billion dollars could have gone a long way just to fix up or replace dilapidated buildings. Instead, the university developed a master plan that set a more ambitious goal of integrating the best of the existing infrastructure with new facilities and constructing what would be essentially a new campus at Storrs—pedestrian-friendly, technologically advanced, attractive and accessible.

The university also created a new urban campus in downtown Stamford to replace an out-of-the-way facility on the city's outskirts, began construction of a new urban campus in Waterbury, built a dramatic new Marine Sciences Building in the coastal community of Groton to capitalize on the university's potential strength in a field that is vital to Connecticut's economy, and made more modest upgrades at the other regional campuses.

With more than 150 major construction or renovation projects completed or in progress, UConn 2000 is now two-thirds of the way to completion. Each project has its own special attributes, but some are worthy of particular note:

- The new Chemistry Building houses the most technologically sophisticated classrooms and chemistry laboratories on any university campus and won the 2001 Merit Award for Excellence in Architecture from the New England Regional Council of the American Institute of Architects.
- New or extensively renovated residence facilities dramatically expand the range of options available to students. Some, focused on freshmen, offer extensive programs that ease the transition to college. Others, oriented to upper-division or graduate students, offer suite-style living or modern apartments.
- The Wilbur Cross student administrative building, housed at the extensively renovated former library facility, provides high-tech, one-stop shopping for registration, financial aid, housing, meal plan and other student services.
- The Lodewick Visitors Center, financed largely through private support, has changed the way the university greets the thousands of visitors to campus and created an attractive, welcoming atmosphere for prospective students.

UConn 2000 has become a fine example of a government investment that has succeeded in meeting its objectives and fulfilling important public goals. The University of Connecticut has been transformed physically, and more importantly, repositioned in the eyes of students and their families. Once the "safety school" for Connecticut's best students, UConn is now a college of choice. Freshman enrollment at Storrs has grown by 56 percent since 1995; minority freshman enrollment

has grown by 62 percent. Average SAT scores have risen significantly, and the university has recruited more than 300 high school valedictorians and salutatorians.

Other indicators also demonstrate transformation. Private support skyrocketed from \$8 million in 1995 to more than \$50 million in 2001, aided significantly by the state matching grant program that was initiated under UConn 2000 and subsequently extended. The university's endowment has grown from about \$50 million in 1995 to about \$210 million, and in 1999, the university received the largest single gift ever to a public university in New England: \$23 million from alumnus Ray Neag (of which \$21 million was focused on the School of Education—the largest single gift to a School of Education anywhere in the United States). Research awards, meanwhile, have climbed from less than \$100 million in 1995 to an estimated \$160 million this year.

This is a remarkable metamorphosis in a remarkably short time. But the job is not done. The original billion-dollar commitment met less than half the needs of a group of campuses whose infrastructure had been neglected for several decades. Despite major improvements, important needs at the University's Health Center in Farmington, at the Law School in Hartford, at several of the regional campuses and at Storrs itself remain unmet.

As of mid-June 2002, the Connecticut General Assembly was considering an extension of UConn 2000 proposed by Gov. Rowland earlier in the year. The initiative, called 21st Century UConn, is a \$1.3 billion, 11-year program that would, if adopted, play as great a role as UConn 2000 in enhancing the university's appeal to students, its ability to contribute to Connecticut's economic growth and its capacity to build on a strong record of research performance. Like UConn 2000, 21st Century UConn addresses facilities needs at Storrs, the regional campuses and the law school; going beyond UConn 2000 it also would invest in the revitalization of facilities and the enhancement of research capacity at the Health Center.

State support in itself cannot make a great university; that requires a commitment by faculty, students, staff and all the internal and external constituencies that comprise an academic community. But if Connecticut's experience in the seven years since the adoption of UConn 2000 is any indication, capital investment by the state plays a major role in making a much-needed transformation possible. The University of Connecticut, long a very good regional institution of higher education, is now clearly identified as a center of excitement where all the important trend lines are pointing upward. We have every expectation that the foundation laid in the mid-1990s sets the stage for continuing progress in the years ahead.

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