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Standards Are a Calling For Bold SUNY Trustee

By KAREN W. ARENSON

When Candace de Russy taught a course called "America and Historical Decline" a few years ago at the New School for Social Research, her favorite author was the Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset. She was taken with his lament over the decline of European civilization, the decline of standards and the lack of leadership by the passive elite.

She, too, is preoccupied with the decline of standards, but she is anything but passive. She was an architect of the core curriculum that the State University of New York adopted last week. And as a SUNY trustee, she has become one of the most outspoken and powerful voices nationally in reshaping higher education.

"She is willing to walk through fire and take hectoring and ridicule that most people don't have the stomach for," said Thomas W. Carroll, president of Change New York, a conservative advocacy group. "I really can't think of any comparable person around the country, and I've looked."

To the dismay of critics, who accuse Dr. de Russy (her name is pronounced duh-RUE-see) of micromanaging SUNY and trampling on academic freedom, there is little on SUNY's 64 campuses that escapes her attention.

When she found out that a women's studies conference at SUNY New Paltz last year included sessions on sadomasochism and sex toys, for example, she drew national attention to the meeting, calling it "academically beyond the pale and an irresponsible use of public funds."

And she has been pressing for a variety of changes at SUNY -- from the adoption of a core curriculum to stronger accountability for college presidents.

Not content just to shape SUNY, Dr. de Russy, 55, has reached beyond New York by writing a

stream of newspaper articles and delivering speeches at national conferences.

"I do not, to say the least, perceive myself to be the font of all wisdom," she said. "But I was appointed and explicitly exhorted by the Governor to exercise my best judgment in those fiscal and academic matters entrusted to me. I believe that broad, essentially discipline-based general education serves the best interest of students and society."

"I believe this to be right," she added. "And I am obliged in my heart and mind to do what is right."

Such activism is unusual for a college trustee, said Jerry L. Martin, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, a conservative interest group of which Dr. de Russy is a member.

"The typical higher education maxim is, 'Don't rock the boat,' " he said. "But she's making waves."

Not everyone is cheering.

Assemblyman Edward C. Sullivan, a Democrat of Manhattan who is chairman of the Assembly's higher education committee, said such heavy oversight may hurt SUNY.

"You cannot run a modern university with political appointees harassing the professors as to what and how they teach," he said, alluding to her actions against SUNY New Paltz. "Good professors and administrators will not come if that is allowed."

Arnold B. Gardner, another SUNY trustee, said Dr. de Russy has provoked discussion, "but she's done some injury to the reputation of the university by suggesting they never heard of standards before."

With some 370,000 students on 64 campuses, SUNY is one of the largest public university systems in the country, but none of its campuses has ever had the cachet of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor or the University of California at Berkeley. And under Gov. George E. Pataki, it was ripe for change.

Many of Dr. de Russy's fellow board members, also appointed by the Governor, share her views on education, and together they control the 15-member board. While she offers passion and an agenda, Thomas F. Egan, the board chairman, and other trustees provide the political skills to turn ideas into policy.

Unlike most of the other trustees whose jobs limit their time, Dr. de Russy has virtually made SUNY a full-time career. She is a Westchester County resident married to Cortes de Russy, a

banking executive, and although she said she had considered running for office, she concluded that her family life was more important and said that she was "more interested in issues than politics."

She devotes hours to writing articles, book reviews and memos. She is frequently in touch with others focused on education, including reporters, not hesitating to call again and again to make sure she explains her positions thoroughly.

"Others might work 60 to 80 hours a week at a job -- she has this," said Mr. Carroll of Change New York. "This is her passion, and she also has the luxury of time."

Dr. de Russy is an elegant woman, with a deep, melodious voice, carefully trimmed blond hair and a love for silk scarves and other rich fabrics (she wore a red velvet smoking jacket to last week's board meeting). But she is willing to act tough.

When SUNY's provost, Peter D. Salins, failed to complete a survey on core courses last month, she lashed out at him during a meeting. It did not matter that he was usually her ally, or that she supported him for the job. She was impatient to move ahead.

"Peeeterrrr," she said, drawing out his name slowly and reprovingly, "you said you would report to us."

Dr. de Russy's vision grew out of her own upbringing in Baton Rouge, La. Her father, a city judge, passed on to her his love for the classics. Dr. de Russy recalled listening to the Socratic dialogues on the phonograph. And at St. Mary's Dominican College in New Orleans, her studies were filled with the classics, religion and philosophy.

"I will be forever grateful for the strong liberal arts foundation I was given," she said, "and I want to bring that great advantage to students today."

After studying Jean Genet at the Sorbonne and earning a doctorate in French literature at Tulane University, she headed north with her husband and began teaching European languages and literature at small Catholic colleges.

But she always has been interested in public affairs and causes, from efforts on behalf of Vietnamese boat people and Cuban prisoners to the Westchester branch of Change New York, an anti-tax group. She was an early supporter of Mr. Pataki for governor.

As her two children entered school, Dr. de Russy also began writing and speaking on education. She was distressed by what she saw as a lack of educational standards. And she believed that a critical solution was to require rigorous courses that would give students basic knowledge about subjects like history and literature and skills like writing.

Five years ago, she was named to the board of Westchester Community College, and in 1995, Governor Pataki promoted her to SUNY's board, where she quickly offered her own agenda.

Last week, she delightedly declared victory when the core curriculum was approved by her fellow trustees, and said she hoped that governing boards across the country would take similar action. She also expressed excitement on Friday about the state's new provisions that would allow SUNY to issue charters for autonomous public schools, which she said "will present SUNY with an exciting opportunity to contribute at the cutting edge to the improvement of K-through-12 education in the state."

And she was already turning her attention to the issues she said she wanted to press next: grading policies, teacher education, admissions standards and measures of what students have learned.

Organizations mentioned in this article:

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