

At JCSU, Ron Carter is off to a swift start

By Peter St. Onge

pstsonge@charlotteobserver.com

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His assistant calls him "Microwave" - a name that's caught on not only on the campus of Johnson C. Smith University, but also a few miles away in uptown. Even Ron Carter can't help but grin at its mention.

Microwave. Yes, says the president of JCSU. It speaks to his intensity and need to accomplish things quickly. And no, it is not inaccurate.

In just more than a year, Carter has begun to transform this 142-year-old institution, raising admission standards and reaching out beyond the iron gates that surround the university. He has partnered with westside leaders in launching a leadership program that will give voice to the neighborhoods and learning opportunities to his students. He has partnered with Charlotte arts leaders to develop a new performing arts curriculum.

"He is engaging. He is talented," says Michael Smith, president of Charlotte Center City partners. "He's captivated the Charlotte community."

On campus, his bosses are pleasantly stunned at the volume of ventures he's taking on. "We're a little worried about his workload," says trustee Tom Baldwin. But: "We're very pleased."

That energy, and that pace, is intentional, says Carter, who is 61. His vision, to transform JCSU into a vibrant urban university, comes at a time when the city also may be redefining itself. Last month, the Observer asked 150 community and business leaders which groups would be gaining influence in Charlotte in the coming years. At the top of the list: Universities, which will supply the human capital needed to help Charlotte diversify its economy moving forward.

"There is going to be a battle for talent in the future," says Smith. "There's a belief that companies are going to follow the talent, and the cities that retain the best talent are going to have the best jobs."

Not coincidentally, UNC Charlotte Chancellor Phil Dubois was picked in the survey as one top 10 most influential people in Charlotte moving forward, and Carter and Central Piedmont Community College President Tony Zeiss were mentioned prominently as emerging leaders.

Says Carter: "We can complete the vision Charlotte has for itself."

Doing so, however, means overcoming challenges afflicting many historically black colleges, including low graduation rates (JCSU, at 41 percent, is lowest among its Charlotte-area peers) and questions about the effectiveness of their curricula.

Among Carter's first moves as president was to push for more rigorous admission standards. It's a move that might initially hurt the school's enrollment of about 1,400, but he hopes that JCSU will emerge with what he calls a more "highly motivated, highly talented" student body.

Those students, he says, will be better equipped to engage the city on several levels. Carter, like most college presidents, wants his school connected with his city's corporate culture, and to that end

he has worked to become so himself, meeting with business leaders and serving on the boards of Charlotte Center City Partners, Foundation for the Carolinas and Charlotte Museum of History.

But Carter also wants his students in neighborhoods throughout the city, especially in the westside that JCSU calls home. To that end, he led the creation of JCSU's Center for Applied Leadership and Community Development. The program aims for students to learn about grass-roots leadership while helping the westside collectively confront the social and economic issues it has long faced.

It is unfamiliar territory for JCSU, which historically has been content to focus inward. "Every city, I would hope, has a soul," Carter says. "That's the mission of every urban university - every urban college - to help a city see, feel and articulate that soul. If we don't do that, we're nothing more than an ivory tower that will dry rot."

Smith of Center City Partners says Charlotte's leaders envision a blueprint of higher ed that includes contributions not only from JCSU, but from UNCC, with its upcoming uptown campus and designs on top-tier research status, as well as Queens University of Charlotte's blend of liberal arts and professional studies, and CPCC.

Zeiss, at CPCC, says his school's role is providing a work force for technical jobs - "beyond high school but below the baccalaureate degree." Recent initiatives at CPCC include a new culinary school, a Health Services Center to serve the growing medical industry, and a partnership with Duke Energy to provide technical training in that burgeoning industry.

"We change our curriculum as jobs need changing," Zeiss says. "We're very nimble."

As is JCSU under Carter. Last year, he called a meeting of arts leaders in Charlotte, including representatives from the N.C. Dance Theatre and Charlotte Symphony, to build a curriculum for a new arts major he envisioned.

"We're a city teeming in arts," Carter says. "We asked them to develop something innovative that would be meaningful for the students and the community."

That Individual and Performing Arts curriculum was finished three months ago, then approved by JCSU officials. The school promptly found a spot near campus where, earlier this month, officials broke ground on a new arts center that Carter hopes will be the anchor to a community of shops and restaurants and entertainment.

Carter has more initiatives in sight, including starting its first graduate programs, in computer engineering and social work, and turning the Interstate 77 underpass that serves as a gateway to JCSU into public art.

His intensity, he says, is part internal - "Once you're bitten by a passion, you really have to make it happen" - but it's also the recognition that this is his school's moment. And his city's. And, left unsaid, perhaps his own.

"You're not what you used to be," he says. "You're not what you want to be. In a very essential way, you're nothing yet. What's next? You stretch.

"There's always a risk you're going to fall into a black hole. But that's exciting."