

TCNJ

MAGAZINE FALL 2017

OUR NOTORIOUS R.B.G.

First female president
R. Barbara Gitenstein winds down
a supremely productive tenure

INSIDE: Wow, Brower Student Center! | Secrets from campus | Wait, there's an encore for TCNJ's Campaign?



eminent president

**R. Barbara Gitenstein transformed TCNJ
into one of the nation's top public colleges.
This is how she did it.**

words Christopher Hann

Inside a hotel conference room near Newark Airport in the fall of 1998, R. Barbara Gitenstein had just finished a long and grueling interview before the search committee that sought a successor to Harold Eickhoff, then the president of The College of New Jersey.



Welcome mat
TCNJ celebrates R. Barbara Gitenstein's inauguration with a cake in the shape of Green Hall.

Gitenstein was the executive vice president and provost at Iowa's private Drake University, a veteran academic who had begun her career as an English professor at Central Missouri State University and served her first administrative role as associate provost for the State University of New York-Oswego. When TCNJ's presidency opened up, SUNY-Oswego's former president urged Gitenstein to apply for the job. She did, and now, as she prepared to fly back to Iowa, Gitenstein knew she had made the right decision. She was eager to return to a public college setting and thrilled at the prospect of leading TCNJ. She searched for the nearest pay phone to call her husband, Donald Hart, back in Des Moines. "This is it," she told him. "I could really fit in there."

Of course, since January 1, 1999, when Gitenstein began her tenure as TCNJ's first woman president, she has more than fit in. (Today her colleagues know her simply as Bobby; students call her "the Git.") Wielding a leadership style focused on collaboration — "I love giving people credit when they deserve it," she says — Gitenstein has shepherded the college through an unprecedented period of accomplishment. During her 18-year presidency, the curriculum has been overhauled.

"TCNJ has really become an extraordinary gem under Bobby's leadership." —Princeton President Christopher Eisgruber

The four-year graduation rate has climbed to among the highest in the country. The campus has added 1.6 million square feet of new construction. The college's first fundraising campaign exceeded its \$40 million goal. And national magazines, citing both the college's academics and its value, routinely rank TCNJ among the top public colleges in the country.

This summer, during a meeting of the college's board of trustees at the Brower Student Center, Gitenstein referred to these achievements when she announced her plans to retire following the current academic year. A flood of hosannas soon followed.

Princeton University President Christopher Eisgruber, who served with Gitenstein on a national panel that studied accreditation standards, says he came away impressed with her sincerity, her energy, and her values. "TCNJ has really become an extraordinary gem under Bobby's leadership," Eisgruber says. "What I see is someone who has the heart and soul of a teacher and scholar. She's had one of the really successful college presidencies in the country."

Thomas Kean, the former New Jersey governor and Drew University president whose counsel Gitenstein sought often while navigating her early years at TCNJ, concurs. "I've watched

her carefully," Kean says. "There are a lot of college presidents who expanded the university, and some have helped with quality. Very seldom has somebody been able to do both. And she's done both in quite a remarkable way. Today TCNJ is known by people way outside the state's borders."

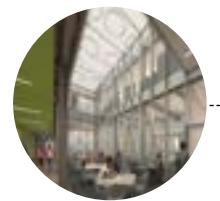
Gitenstein won special praise for her handling of campus debate, such as renaming Paul Loser Hall after student researchers found that its namesake, Trenton's former schools superintendent, sought to keep the city's public schools segregated in violation of a 1944 N.J. Supreme Court ruling. Gitenstein called for a full and public airing of the case against Loser. She also had to communicate with Loser's descendants, who happened to be generous donors to the college. In the end, the committee that studied the case recommended renaming Loser Hall. Gitenstein, initially resistant to the idea, was swayed by the facts presented. The building is now known as Trenton Hall.

"She just handles difficult situations beautifully," says Eleanor Horne, a TCNJ trustee. "With Loser Hall she acknowledged that this was important work for students to do, she trusted the process, and carefully considered what was learned."

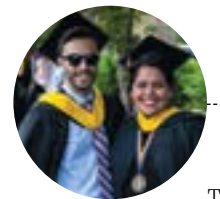
R.B.G. milestones



Academic sea change
Mentored research and in-depth coursework boosts the quality of the college.



Innovative placemaking
Six new buildings constructed.



On-time diplomas
TCNJ boasts a 76 percent four-year graduation rate, among the highest in the U.S.



Generous alumni and friends
The Campaign for TCNJ, the college's first fundraising campaign, raises \$47.5 million.



Heavyweight acclaim
National media routinely rank TCNJ among the top public colleges in the nation.



Gitenstein, top, shines when she spends time with students. New Jersey Governor Chris Christie and Gitenstein, bottom, stand at the Campus Town groundbreaking in 2013.

In Gitenstein's first year as president, 5,755 high school seniors applied to TCNJ. This year the college received 12,896 applications, an increase of 124 percent.

Gitenstein's first major initiative as president came to be known as the academic transformation — a top-to-bottom reimagining of the college's academics. The idea, she says, was to reinforce TCNJ's liberal arts core. Under the transformation, students would take four courses each semester instead of five, and faculty would teach three courses instead of four. The change was designed to enable students to dive deeper into their coursework and boost research opportunities for both students and faculty. Michael Robertson, an English professor and former president of the Faculty Senate, says Gitenstein achieved the transformation not by managing it herself — he calls her “the opposite of a micromanager” — but by allowing faculty to take the reins. In fact, he believes Gitenstein's collaborative nature has been critical to her success as president. In 2009, the American Association of University Professors presented Gitenstein with its award for shared governance. It was the TCNJ faculty that had nominated her. “She's a straight talker,” Robertson says. “It's refreshing to talk with a college president who's so informal, frank, and funny.”

By the time the transformation was formally enacted in the fall of 2004, Robertson says, “We had a curriculum that was much more like a top liberal arts school. It really increased the academic quality of the college.”

Those changes have enabled countless TCNJ undergraduates, such as Syndi Barish and Andrew Goldfarb, both '16, to work in research laboratories alongside faculty. Barish, a double major in biology and applied mathematics, recently published a paper, co-authored with mathematics professors Jana Gevertz and Michael Ochs, in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. Their work applied mathematical models and statistics to gauge the effectiveness of certain cancer treatments. “I wouldn't have done that until graduate school if it wasn't for this experience,” says Barish, who's now pursuing a PhD in genetics at Yale.

Goldfarb, a biology major, worked with biology professor Don Lovett, studying the process of osmoregulation (how organisms regulate water

and salt content) in crabs. He also received a coveted Goldwater Scholarship, to which he attributes “the hours of attention” he received from Lovett. These days he's pursuing a PhD in biomedical sciences at Harvard. “I really took advantage of the research opportunities there,” Goldfarb says. “TCNJ was really unique in that I could get involved early. I wasn't limited. I wasn't told no. If I asked and tried hard enough, I could do it.”

ANOTHER MATTER Gitenstein addressed in her presidency was TCNJ's graduation rate. Believing that higher education's standard six-year long yardstick set the bar too low, Gitenstein declared the college would start tracking the rate of students graduating within four years, and she set about to improve it. During her tenure, TCNJ's four-year graduation rate climbed from 58 percent to 76 percent. Two years ago, in a survey of four-year graduation rates among public colleges, *Money* ranked TCNJ sixth in the nation. Meanwhile, applications to the college skyrocketed. In Gitenstein's first year as president, 5,755 high school seniors applied to TCNJ. This year the college received 12,896 applications, an increase of 124 percent.

Gitenstein also oversaw a dramatic transformation of the TCNJ campus during her presidency. Since 1999 the college has spent more than \$380 million on its physical plant, including six new buildings and housing for 400 students. Three of the latest projects will be completed this year: The 74,000-square-foot STEM Complex, a 15,000-square-foot addition to the chemistry building, and a \$38 million renovation of the Brower Student Center funded mostly by Sodexo Campus Services, the college's food service provider.

To construct the much anticipated Campus Town development adjacent to campus — a mix of 350,000 square feet of retail space and apartments for 612 students, opened in 2015 — Gitenstein took advantage of a new state law permitting colleges to forgo the public bidding process for construction projects and work directly with private contractors. As a result, Campus Town, built by a private developer for \$120 million, will generate close to \$50 million in income for TCNJ over the 50-year life of the contract (the developer pays TCNJ a ground lease while generating revenue from apartment and retail rentals).

“The buildings she's put up — the design, the location, the money and quality that have gone into the physical infrastructure — are pretty amazing,” says Curt Heuring, vice president for administration. “It has become one of the strongest selling points for the campus during her tenure.”

Four years ago, emboldened by the college's progress, Gitenstein and the trustees began to plan TCNJ's first fundraising campaign, a critically important initiative in an era of dwindling state support. When Gitenstein arrived at TCNJ, New Jersey supplied 55 percent of the college's operating budget. Today that figure is 28 percent. She and the campaign's leaders met with a private consultant, who

think out loud

“TO ME, A LEADER IS A PERSON who encourages others to believe that the impossible or improbable is possible and then provides resources and space and encouragement — and that's what she has done.”

—Eleanor Horne, TCNJ trustee

“I THINK MOST OF US have bedrock confidence in Bobby. She's earned that because she has helped usher through remarkable change, and she's had to deal with some challenges over the years.”

—Amanda Norvell, professor of biology

“ONE OF BOBBY'S CORE VALUES is shared governance. As a board, we have faculty, students, and staff representatives, and everybody was encouraged to participate.

She really set the tone.”

—David Blake, professor of English, and faculty representative to the board of trustees for two years

“SHE'S A VERY MORAL PERSON. She's also smart as hell.”

—Donald Hart, President Gitenstein's unbiased husband

suggested TCNJ would do well to raise \$25 million. Not good enough. They set a goal of \$40 million. By June 30, the campaign generated \$47.5 million from more than 13,000 donors.

“That, to me,” says Jorge Caballero, chair of TCNJ's board of trustees, “is a tremendous indication of the power of the leader and the power of the message that we have been able to deliver because of what she has done over the last 18 years.” Her tenure also puts the college in a strong position as it embarks on a search for her successor. “I know we have a tremendous story to tell prospective candidates,” he says,

“and a lot of that is because of the success we've achieved under Dr. Gitenstein.”

ROSE BARBARA GITENSTEIN grew up in the 1950s in tiny Florala, Alabama, on the Florida border. Her father, Seymour, ran a local shirt factory that employed 800 people, a station that made him a civic leader of some prominence. But Gitenstein says she and her family were always considered outsiders in Florala, for two reasons: They were Northerners, and they were

Clockwise from top left:
The Gitensteins — mother Anne,
brother Mark, Bobby, father
Seymour and sister Susan Assadi.
Bobby and Don's family:
daughter-in-law Karen Lee,
son Samuel, (late) son-in-law
Ellis Barber, and daughter
Pauline Hart Barber.
Bobby and Don enjoy loving
on their granddaughter Ruby Mei
and time together.



Jewish. Recalling the nature of race relations in her insular hometown, Gitenstein says, “We could see things that were clearly contradictory to the values we were taught at home.”

Seymour Gitenstein, born in New York City, had aspired to be a concert pianist, but when he was 17 he moved to Florala to open the factory for his father’s business. “I learned a lot from him — I didn’t realize this until much, much later — about being a manager,” Gitenstein says. “He was always about people. He had a factory and he knew every single person, he knew everybody’s mother, father, cousin, aunt — who was getting married, who was having a baby.”

Gitenstein’s husband, Donald Hart, also grew up in Florala, and she says she doesn’t remember a time when she didn’t know Don. But given that he’s seven years older, they didn’t begin dating until they were college undergrads — she was at Duke; he, after a four-year stint in the Navy, was finishing a second bachelor’s degree at the University of Alabama. Both went on to earn their doctoral

degrees at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill — hers in English and his in philosophy. They married after her first semester at UNC, and they have been inseparable ever since. In December they’ll celebrate their 48th anniversary. “My joke,” Hart says, “is that I have been president of the Bobby Gitenstein Fan Club for 50 years.”

Gitenstein and Hart plan to retire to an apartment on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, from which they plan to indulge in the city’s museums, theaters, and restaurants, and especially the Metropolitan Opera. They’ll also have more time to spend with their

1-year-old granddaughter, Ruby Mei Hart, who lives in California.

Her advice for her successor?

“I would advise that person to listen, as I did, and listen not just to me, and whatever material I’ve left, but to listen broadly,” she says. “Be attentive to the forces around us that are threatening higher education and threatening democracy, and to be responsive to that. But don’t be so responsive to the newest, shiniest object, and lose what has been created at The College of New Jersey. There’s something very special, so build on that. But it will look different, and it should look different.”

Certainly the college is a very different institution today than it was when Gitenstein arrived in 1999, and many of those who have witnessed the evolution of TCNJ credit her for the transformation. That high regard across the campus community was rendered evident on July 11, when Gitenstein formally announced her retirement in the same room in which she had been introduced as TCNJ’s president more than 18 years earlier. Reading from a prepared statement, she fought back her emotions, stopping to gather herself more than once, particularly when acknowledging her husband, who was seated in the front row. “He has been patient with me when I could not let go of the thoughts of work — intruding on our dinners, our vacations, and on our sleep,” she said. “He is the smartest person I know, and I love him with all my heart.”

When she finished, the trustees took to their feet — and those in the audience did likewise — and saluted her with a long and rousing standing ovation.

A former senior editor at New Jersey Monthly, CHRISTOPHER HANN is a frequent contributor to TCNJ Magazine. He wrote “20/20 Vision” in the Spring 2017 issue.



emily & me

President Gitenstein has a major American poet on her side.

It’s become something of a TCNJ tradition. In most speeches she gives, R. Barbara Gitenstein quotes her favorite poet, Emily Dickinson. Those in the know will smile and nod, understanding that every such incantation is also a signal that the president’s speech is coming to a close.

It began in the first week of Gitenstein’s presidency, in January 1999, during orientation for transfer students, when she used Dickinson’s *We never know how high we are*.

*We never know how high we are
Till we are called to rise;
And then, if we are true to plan,
Our statures touch the skies*

“It’s a well-known trademark,” English professor Michael Robertson says of Gitenstein’s affinity for Dickinsonian prose. “It particularly warms an English professor’s heart.”

Gitenstein, who wrote her doctoral thesis on Jewish-American literature, insists she’s no Dickinson scholar but merely an aficionado. “She’s so wonderfully cryptic, and funny, and beautiful,” Gitenstein says. “She’s a real voice for the power of women.”

And in this last year of her presidency, Gitenstein is likely to invoke that voice again and again. “She wrote 1,790 poems,” Gitenstein says, “so I’ll never run out of material.” —*Christopher Hann*