

FEATURE

Accomplished Chinese Americans

An Inside Look At Final Days of Search for SJSU Chief

by Becky Bartindale

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The first question did it. Sitting at the head of a table in a gray conference room at the Los Angeles Airport Westin Hotel, Paul Yu did the vision thing. In his clear, concise and reasoned way, the philosopher from Brockport, N.Y., laid out his ideas for the future in eight points, elaborating on each. About 30 minutes after it began, the interview was over. Within the hour, California State University trustees had voted and Chancellor Charles Reed was preparing to offer Yu the presidency of San Jose State University. Reed and the trustees could finally exhale. The torturous search for someone to lead CSU's oldest campus was almost over. They had rejected the first three finalists in November. But Reed was sure that the two new ones - Yu and Richard S. Jarvis, chancellor of the University of Oregon system - could replace the popular former president, Robert Caret, and guide the campus through hard budget times. But which one could push it down the road to greatness? If everything fell apart. Reed already had settled on Plan B: appoint an acting president for a year or two.

Lukewarm Interest

Yu was only mildly interested when a headhunter contacted him about the opening at San Jose State. He often received such calls and almost always declined. His boss, the chancellor of the State University System of New York, had been talking with him about his future, perhaps as head of one of the system's later schools. After seven years as president of SUNY's Brockport campus. Yu, 62, had successfully led an effort to turn the second-choice party school into a

respected academic institution embraced by its community. But the more he learned about San Jose State, the more intrigued Yu became. He was lured by its size - nearly 30,000 students compared with Brockport's 8,500 - its variety of programs and its diverse community.

The university presented an interesting challenge, full of promise. And the good weather didn't hurt. When he visited the campus, Yu said, people exuded good will. Yu felt the rapport. "The faculty at San Jose smelled out that I'm a kindred spirit," he said. "I've done what they've done. I have the same values. They don't have to spell out to some dumb old administrator what is important." By the time of his final interview, Yu knew he wanted to be in San Jose and could deliver what the university needed. The talent and the answers were all there. What was missing was a president to help pull it all together with a strategic plan, just as Yu had done in Brockport. "It's a vision issue," Yu said. San Jose has to decide "what are its highest priorities and what does it want to be?"

Comparing candidates

Before the closed session Monday with the candidates and trustees. Reed had spent the preceding three days on the telephone with members of the search advisory committee, which includes representatives from the San Jose campus and community. The committee had already interviewed both candidates at length. "In every case, with everybody I talked to, their first sentence was that either candidate would be fine," he said. Word back from the campus visits was

that Jarvis, the Oregon -chancellor, was considered more charismatic and had been more circumspect in some of his answers. In fact, many compared his relaxed, engaging manner to Caret, the former president. Yu, who came across as disciplined, serious and scholarly, answered questions bluntly and directly. "Paul Yu tried to ask as many questions as he answered," Reed said. "He was trying to analyze what the big problems were and what needed to be done."

Reed had worked hard to attract the best candidates. He'd flown to Miami, New York, Chicago and Texas to personally recruit them. "I was disappointed along the way that we couldn't keep everyone in," he said. Compensation was an insurmountable issue for some candidates because salaries for CSU presidents can run about half those in some other parts of the country. Yu knew that salaries in CSU range from \$188,000 to \$253,000 annually. "Paul Yu having a son who wants to practice law in California was extremely helpful," Reed said. "That's part of being lucky."

Final Interviews

The monthslong search came down to the final interviews: the candidates. Reed and 12 trustees behind closed doors, no minutes, no recordings. Jarvis interviewed first. His broad experience as a leader in higher education, coupled with his deep commitment to students and personable style, made it easy for trustees to see him as a CSU president. "When Richard Jarvis walked out of the room, everyone was walking around the room saying, 'My God, I can't believe how good that guy was,' " Reed said.

Then it was Yu's turn. As chairman of the presidential search committee, trustee William Hauck asked the first question. It went something like this: What do you see as the biggest problems and opportunities at San Jose State, and what would you do there? The characteristically well-prepared Yu laid out his eight points, and explained how he could carry them out. Reed recalled the gist of what Yu said first: "I want to

bring pride to San Jose State University. It's got great students, faculty and staff. It's located in a great place and it needs to feel better about itself. It's better than it thinks it is."

Yu talked about developing a financial model to carry the campus through hard times and into the future. He said the campus needs to unify its many independent units, so the whole is stronger than its parts. He talked about how important it is to have collegial, transparent governance so there will be trust when the president has to make hard decisions. He said fundraising must be emphasized and the research foundation reinvigorated to support all the research that is going on. More partnerships should be built with the community and industry. And he talked about the need to resolve the concern that too much money from the university general fund is going into athletics. When he was done, Reed said, "I could see, 'Yes! Yes! Yes! This guy has really thought about it and has one heck of an understanding about what he thinks needs to be done.' I looked around the room and, wham! there was a home run."

Yu seemed to have an uncommonly good grasp of San Jose State's attributes and opportunities as well as the challenges facing it, said trustee Fred Pierce. And he had the personal character to carry it out. The interview left Pierce with a resonating feeling that there would be "a hand-in-glove fit" intellectually between Yu, the university and the community. Trustee Anthony Vitti said his gut told him in the first five minutes that Yu was the man. "He is exceptionally presidential," he said. By the end of the interview Vitti was sure: Yu could "take it to the next level."

Search Ends

Reed placed the call to Yu: "The board has authorized me to offer you the presidency of San Jose State University," Reed said. "That's good!" said Yu. "Do you accept?" Reed asked. It was as quick as that. San-Jose State, and Reed, had their scholar president.