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EDUCATION

PITT MOM TAKES THE HELM

JOAN T.A. GABEL BEGINS HER TENURE AS THE 19TH CHANCELLOR AND FIRST WOMAN TO LEAD THE UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

Joan Gabel, chancellor, University of Pittsburgh

BECKY THURNER BRADDOCK



By [Jordyn Hronec](#) – Associate Editor, Pittsburgh Business Times
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On April 3, 2023, the University of Pittsburgh announced that Joan T.A. Gabel would serve as its next chancellor, following an announcement last summer that Patrick Gallagher, Pitt’s previous chancellor of nine years, would be stepping down from the post in order to become a full-time physics professor at the university. Gabel is the 19th chancellor in Pitt’s history, and, notably, the first woman to ever serve in the role. A self-described “Pitt mom,” she officially began her tenure in July 2023 after serving most recently as president of the University of Minnesota. In this interview, she discusses her vision for the years ahead, as well as initiatives Pitt is undertaking to secure its future and improve the student experience.

What has your first month as chancellor been like?

[There's been] a wonderful welcome from the community on campus, in the city and in the region – it has been very warm. We asked for feedback, and people have been very engaged in offering it. ... A lot of time has been spent with meet and greets and face-to-face with the people who are here at this time of year, and [we are] also doing some of our work nationally and looking at the role that Pitt plays in the national conversations with the different academic and professional associations that we're a part of.

Your son's a Pitt student. Aside from that, what brought you to Pitt?

[Previous Pitt Chancellor] Pat Gallagher and I were often seated next to each other [at meetings for national higher ed organizations]. A lot of our national organizations use alphabetical seating. So Gabel and Gallagher, we're always right next to each other, so we've known each other for a long time. And Pitt's national reputation is well-known and very, very strong. But the heartbeat you really see in a very unique way when you send your child off to a place. So that combination of what I knew about where things were going here in this region and on this

campus, and then what I saw in terms of [my son's] experience as a student, when I heard that this opportunity was coming available, I was extremely interested.



Image: Becky Thurner Braddock

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What is your short-term and long-term vision for the university?

There's work to do with the budget. This is very active right now. As we await the outcome of the extended legislative session, it very much affects a lot of our decision making. We have a budget approved, but the final word from Harrisburg will be very important in how we execute on that approved budget. ... We're spending a lot of time on the short-term things, and, concurrently, I'm really diving in on Plan for Pitt, which is the strategic plan for the university. And that planning process reached a point that now it is ready for its next chapter. In terms of what this plan will mean, how we set our priorities, how we'll know whether it's working, I'll have the opportunity to bring the plan to that point. That works in a shared governance process really closely with the trustees. ... And then it's really possible that we'll start thinking seriously about our next capital campaign. We haven't had one in a while, and it's a natural cycle to do it concurrently with

strategic planning. If you're really bringing your stakeholders in and saying what are we about into the future, then looking for support and partnership often involves philanthropic support at universities.

How can Pitt work with legislators to come up with a long-term solution to the state appropriations funding issue?

I don't think there's any actual plan on the table. But I do think that there's an awareness about how everything can improve, and I think there is some value in exploring how we can create a higher level of certainty. I also think there's some value in exploring why we have the uncertainty, which is not just the budget process, but a question of how we all partner and how we work together.

How can Pitt ensure that it is affordable and accessible to as many students as possible?

Accessible education is the cornerstone to the mission of the institution, so you want the investment of both the tuition but also the time to yield all the things

that one would hope for from an education, obviously professional opportunities, but also the ability to discern, to think critically. ... [Being accessible] is a big part of our conversations with the state legislature. ... In terms of closing the gaps for the students who need it the most, we do that through other measures. We try to keep our costs down as much as possible, either by finding less expensive ways to do things, forgoing certain things, delaying certain things. But you don't want to do that writ large because you want to maintain quality. ... And then we work really closely with our donors and philanthropic partners so that we can direct resources to the students with the highest financial need. We start there and then over time add more and more so that students at a sliding scale of need can hope for and expect that support. But I want to be clear that at the end of the day, increasing tuition is the last mile. So this year we increased tuition by 2% in an approximately 7% inflationary environment. That means that 5% of our average cost increases we bore internally through cost-cutting measures or with the hope of some state support.



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What kinds of projects are going on right now on Pitt's campuses to enhance the student experience?

We're leaning into technology so that students can leverage AI and save some time. It's also fun as these things are novel. We have things around safety and how we can leverage technology to improve safety for our students in our buildings or for our community who use our buildings. The use of technology is also around educational opportunities and how we change the way we deliver content. And then we have some big research initiatives going on with BioForge [at Hazelwood Green], which is the extension of what we're doing in biotechnology and biomanufacturing, which is an incredibly important developing area for the United States, and, arguably, for the world. We're a front-and-center thought leader in this with a tremendous opportunity to be a good partner in the way that our neighboring institutions have developed excellence in robotics. These things all go together as we create an ecosystem in western Pennsylvania around cutting-edge innovation and technology. We have students who will be there, undergraduate and doctoral students, medical students. It's a really neat

opportunity for faculty and a new direction that staff can take in their expertise. We didn't have this kind of employment before. As that develops, I think you'll see a lot of sparkle come off of that.

I also imagine that the BioForge project is something that could lead to more commercialization of products coming out of Pitt.

That's a really important point because when you say you're a research university, people think that's great. But not everybody can see or feel what that means if they're not engaged in the research or perhaps receiving clinical trial treatment. But when you see an entire sector emerge as a result of what researchers are doing in their lab or in their classroom or both, in this case, that has an immediate partnership in the private sector. Then you can see that this is what research universities can do. It's bringing this whole enhancement to our ecosystem here and anchoring it here. If it goes according to plan, it would be a whole sector where we would be the signature home for this type of work. And that's our goal.

What is your outlook on the future of Pitt's regional campuses and the challenges they face?

There are national headwinds against regional campuses. We're not immune. And so I think what you're seeing is very much on trend in terms of challenges with the demographic cliff. ... We have fewer students, and therefore more competition for those students, and regional campuses nationally are feeling that first. The key to the regional campus challenge here is that our campuses each have a unique signature in what they offer and in their environment. We've really got to story-tell that, so that students appreciate the opportunities that are there. I feel very confident that with the right engagement in communities and then high schools to potential students who can understand what their opportunities are that our regional campuses will be fine.

How can institutions of higher ed in Pitt work together?

There's no formal association of campus leaders in the city, but we have an informal association where there's a lot of communication and a lot of discussion around what we're doing for students and where we have shared goals and things greater than the sum of their parts. We also do this statewide, and Pitt works really closely with CMU on the research side of things, and we work with a lot of our other partners on pipelines into some of the more technical undergraduate degrees that smaller campuses don't have the capacity to offer, or things like four plus ones where you can go directly from undergrad into graduate school – where we might offer the graduate degree that our partner institution locally might not offer. And then as you might imagine, there's a lot of shared collaboration around how we make our case for the importance of higher education to this region and to the state. And you'd be amazed at how well we work together on that. ... Everybody wants to be able to collaborate with people who have a shared experience and shared goals, and I think we're all better for it.