



The Nirschels welcome Afghan students during a press conference in 2002.

University Couple

Roger Williams University President Roy J. Nirschel on Issues in Higher Education ... and Paula Nirschel on Educating Young Afghan Women

Under President Roy J. Nirschel, Roger Williams University (RWU) has become more selective, expanded fundraising, reduced tuition discounting and improved graduation rates. His wife Paula is founder of the Initiative to Educate Afghan Women, a scholarship program that provides full scholarships to Afghan women. The Nirschels shared viewpoints on the importance of education opportunities during recent interviews with CONNECTION Executive Editor John O. Harney and NEBHE President Robert Weygand.

Roy Nirschel on Roger Williams University ...

CONNECTION: What steps are you taking to make RWU more diverse?

Roy Nirschel: When people talk about issues of race strictly in terms of black and white, it's an old conversation. My staff tell me we need more black students. I tell them we need more Cape Verdeans, more biracial students, more Dominicans. ... You can't have a faculty that is all white and looks alike. Of the 24 new faculty we hired this year, four are African-American women, one is Native American and five have degrees from institutions in China, Africa, Bulgaria or Italy.

CONNECTION: Do you think faculty diversity will allow you to bring in more diverse students?

Roy Nirschel: No doubt about it. It's very tough to sell students on our commitment to becoming a global university when they come to campus and see everybody is white. Our white students have said one of the few negatives about the university is that there is not enough diversity. They are used to being around students of different ethnic backgrounds. We have a program with Rogers High School, a predominantly minority high school in Newport, R.I., in which our minority students mentor Rogers students to help prepare them for college. In the past two years, a number of those students, mostly black, have come to RWU.

CONNECTION: How would you respond to those who would levy taxes on RWU and other tax-exempt education institutions?

Roy Nirschel: As a nonprofit, we aren't structured to pay taxes. But we contribute in other substantive ways. We have a small operation in Providence. If we were to be taxed on it, it wouldn't be that much. But when the mayor was trying to recruit Chief of Police Dean Esserman, who had been in New Haven and many other places, he didn't have enough money to hire him. We happened to have a federally funded Justice System Training and Research Institute whose purpose was to work with law enforcement on training police and administrators. We said if you hire Dean Esserman as chief, we'll hire him as our first executive in residence. It was a way of showing that we as a private university take our public responsibility seriously. Now, the police officers in Providence are engaged in our criminal justice program in ways in which the previous administration was not. They could have hit us with taxes and it would have gone into the bottomless pit of municipal government. This was a more strategic collaboration for the people of Providence.

When the governor announced his support for taxing higher education institutions, the Bristol town administrator calculated it would cost RWU \$1 million if all our buildings were taxed. I said, "Do you know how many Bristolians we employ? Three-hundred and fifty three! We paid them \$18.7 million." I said, "Do you know how many of their children

went to RWU for free? Do you know how many scholarships we gave through the police and fire departments?" I said, "I'm not going to send you a bill for the \$30 million that we do for the community; don't send me a bill for the \$1 million." If the university were taxed, the average Bristolian would receive \$48 in a tax refund and I'd have to lay off 35 to 40 people. There would be a lot of explaining to do at city hall.

Paula Nirschel on the Afghan Project ...

CONNECTION: How did you get interested in the Afghan Project?

Paula Nirschel: I was glued to CNN after September 11, learning about our tragedy and, at the same time, learning about Afghanistan and the women of Afghanistan. There were a few documentaries about the difficult plight of the Afghan women, including living behind the screens of the burkhas, draped in black. I became haunted by the images of these women, beginning to lose sleep, knowing I had to do something for them. I consulted with my husband and we decided to offer one full, four-year scholarship at RWU for an Afghan woman, and we challenged all the university presidents

across the country to follow suit. I ended up with five scholarships after a few months of cultivating other institutions. Five women arrived from Kabul and Kandahar in the fall of 2003.

CONNECTION: Are the students expected to return to Afghanistan?

Paula Nirschel: Every student must return to Afghanistan after their education to be with family and help with reconstruction. Every student returns in the summer to be with family and to work at jobs that I locate for them ahead of time, to utilize the professional skills they are learning in the states.

CONNECTION: What lessons do the young women offer to their American hosts?

Paula Nirschel: Campus employees and students know that these young women have lived with so much injustice and inadequacies in their lives, and still they remain strong and positive. This is a lesson for anyone who witnesses it. We have been empowered and educated by these women on our college campuses.

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