

Vaughn: In Their Words

Lessons from President Ronald L. Vaughn's tenure are in no short supply.

We asked faculty, staff, students, donors, trustees and others to share what they've learned from UT's departing leader and what they'll remember about working with him. A few themes emerged: vision, execution, sincere interest and kindness.

These are their words.

I first met Ron when we both were on the Tampa Chamber of Commerce board and several other boards. I was impressed with his contributions, so I was elated when he asked if I would join the UT Board of Trustees. Now, some 25 years later, I stand in awe of Ron and his vision. The changes and the impact UT has had on students' lives are amazing, in addition to the impact the University has had on the entire region. Ron, with his wife, Renée, and many others, created a crown jewel in the heart of downtown Tampa, and what a beautiful setting it is! A landmark we can all be proud of. Ron Vaughn is a one-of-a-kind person who not only created the vision but brought it all to reality.

— A.D. "Sandy" MacKinnon, trustee emeritus

It has been a learning experience for me, since early on, to watch Ron Vaughn's leadership in action. Two of his many qualities stand out: optimism and persistence.

Ron visualizes a successful outcome — a spectacular campus building, a new academic program and a potential large donor saying "yes!" He then finds the way to get to that destination, overcoming obstacles, pressing ahead, attending to details and quietly sharing credit for success — all the marks of a true leader.

— Jim Ferman, trustee emeritus and chair emeritus

Dr. Ron Vaughn is one of the most focused individuals I have ever had the pleasure to know and work with. When he became president in 1995, the school was in dire straits with low enrollment, inadequate facilities and a real shortage of money.

Ron's leadership and ability to grow the University was evident when he formed UT's first capital committee in 1997. I was asked to serve on it with the late Al Austin as the chair, and Ron was willing to meet with a countless number of people. Everyone was impressed with the goals he had for UT, and the committee finished its work in 2005, having raised \$84 million.

— The Hon. Bob Martinez '57, former governor of Florida, former mayor of Tampa and President George H.W. Bush's cabinet-level drug czar

Ron is not all business all the time. There is also a softer, more sensitive side to him. For example, I remember my job-interview when Ron danced his way to the hotel's breakfast buffet table to a Mannheim Steamroller holiday tune. This display of his "humanness" helped to sell me on the position. Once on the job, he was always there to lend support if there was a personal crisis. When I retired, we both shed a few tears saying goodbye.

— Barbara Strickler, retired vice president of enrollment

Ron is extraordinary in many ways, but his superpower is his ability to study. All good academic administrators know how to prepare, but at times, action does not follow intent. Ron was always one of the best — if not the best — prepared at the table.

I witnessed this early in his presidency, and it spoke volumes. The attentiveness to big-picture concepts, coupled with vetted knowledge, made a substantive difference, as it brought information, data and critical analyses to decision-making. I am a better learner because of Ron Vaughn.

— Linda Devine, retired vice president of operations and planning

Ron is a gentle, quiet individual who embodies that wonderful quality, unfortunately not present in most executives, of not caring who gets credit for success. He has always been a visionary, and he had the persuasive powers to see those visions come to fruition. He possesses the wisdom of his actions. Many leaders lack that aptitude. This University will forever be in his debt.

— Frank Morsani, former trustee and former member and chair of the Board of Fellows

I first met Ron Vaughn back in the '90s when he invited me on campus for lunch and to give me an overview of the original master plan. He immediately asked for my help and involvement, and it was impossible to not want to support his incredible vision. Ron gave me a tour of the campus, including some old rental homes right behind Plant Hall. The old dorms were still standing and needed major work. It was not long until the buildings were knocked down to make way for some of the first projects.

It all started there. Ron Vaughn changed the way I think about what a model of excellence The University of Tampa is, both physically and academically.

— Gene McNichols, former trustee

My first encounter with Dr. Vaughn was in 1985. At that time, we had a group of faculty, staff and local businessmen who met to play pick-up basketball a couple of days a week. Dr. Vaughn and I are of similar height, so I had to defend him. He was intense, relentless and extremely competitive. I am sure Dr. Vaughn has no recollection of our interaction because he was just there for exercise and some fun. I remember it because he kicked my butt that day, and a few years later, he was named UT's president.

On a side note: I am proud that Dr. Vaughn has indicated to me that one of his most thrilling moments as president was when our volleyball team won the 2021 national championship, at home and in front of a packed house.

— Chris Catanach '83, head volleyball coach

Dr. Vaughn's impact on The University of Tampa and our community is immeasurable and nothing short of amazing. He took a university in a downward spiral and turned it into one of the premier private academic institutions in the nation.

His leadership style is like a quiet storm, working almost behind the scenes to accomplish so much. He had a clear, long-range vision and enabled others to see that vision and buy into it, so he could go year after year, methodically accomplishing the goals to realize that vision for UT.

— Jane Castor '81, mayor of Tampa

Dr. Vaughn's lighter side was always apparent during the annual UT fall workshop/pep rally that I emceed.

Knowing that he and others, like Dan Gura and Larry Marfise, would be the subjects of humorous comments in my opening, I often asked for a pardon before my spiel. Dr. Vaughn seemed to enjoy the event and laughed along with everyone else. He granted the pardon every time.

— Joe Sclafani, retired psychology professor, interim associate provost and dean of academic services

Dr. Vaughn is the kind of leader I aspire to be when I grow up. Not only does he have divine capabilities to transform and cultivate ideas, but he is a kind soul. I'm forever touched by the way he cares when he asks how I am, remembers the little details about my life and always offers his guidance. I'm infinitely grateful that he's taken me under his wing and shared a snippet of his infinite wisdom. I also think it's the coolest thing ever that Dr. Vaughn and I are technically graduating from UT at the same time — even if he does have about 36 years on me.

— Ruby Lefort-Rivas '24, student government president

In 2008, I saw Ron while we were both walking across campus. At the time, I was considering how to make some changes to the strategic analysis program that I manage for the Sykes College of Business. I mentioned the challenge I was facing and the revisions I had in mind.

He listened intently, asked some excellent questions and reminded me to keep our students' education as my top priority. Later that week, he called my office to talk more. His interest in my program demonstrated his dedication to the quality of service that we provide to UT students.

— Jody Tompson, director of the Naimoli Institute for Business Strategy, professor of management and entrepreneurship

Dr. Vaughn's dedication to establishing The University of Tampa as an elite, competitive school and the transformation during his tenure have been remarkable. Several months ago, his message in the UT Journal was about increasing endowed scholarships and how important this was for students and the University's future. His request for donations to the endowment motivated me to join the Centennial Circle. I can't think of a better way to honor him than to contribute to this very important fundraising endeavor. His strong leadership and dedication will be greatly missed, but he has laid the foundation for a successful future.

— Beth Garcia, trustee and president of The Chiselers

What has always struck me about Ron Vaughn is his economy with words. He is the most quietly effective CEO I know.

Back in 1999, I served on the Board of Trustees for a couple of years, and Dr. Vaughn would meet with new trustees one-on-one in his office. Walking in there, you would see these majestic architectural renderings on easels. On the evening I met with him, he stood with me, just gazing at these new buildings that were part of his campus master plan, nodding his head with self-assured determination. I must've written a check a half-dozen times, changing the amount each time — if you can't get excited about Dr. Vaughn's vision for UT, then rigor mortis has set in!

My point is that most successful leaders are either bold visionaries or exemplars executing. It's a rare day when a chief executive can do both.

— Jack Barrett '87, MBA '96, former trustee

Ron Vaughn has always shown genuine care and concern for everyone associated with the University, whether they be employees, students or contract employees.

When Dr. Vaughn was a professor, and the University was in dire straits financially, we began to cut positions and had tuition hikes of 5-6%. As dean and then president, Dr. Vaughn vowed to never have that size of a tuition hike and not to cut employees. He was acutely aware of the hardships that caused. He has always stayed with this commitment.

— Kim Morris, assistant professor of health sciences and human performance