

Peter Liacouras: The Man Who Bent History

By Richard M. Englert, Chancellor

History Professor Emeritus Jim Hilty, in his terrific book on Temple, said it best when he summed up the contributions of former President Peter Liacouras with the following assessment: "... Liacouras bent history and changed the flow of events with transforming ideas and dreams." (p. 219, *Temple University: 125 Years of Service to Philadelphia, the Nation, and the World*, 2010)

Peter did indeed bend history and shape the flow of events not only of Temple but also of public higher education in Pennsylvania.

To understand this, let me provide a very brief background sketch. Peter took over the presidency in 1982, a challenging time in our history. Just prior to his taking office, the university's financial situation was so dire that many staff and faculty members (including tenured ones) were terminated. Student enrollments had dropped; Temple was overwhelmingly a commuter university with little campus life. Too many people from the suburban communities of Pennsylvania and New Jersey saw Temple only through the windows of their cars as they sped up and down Broad Street. Temple's academics was excellent because of an outstanding faculty, but access to that excellence was seriously impaired by external circumstances well beyond the faculty's control. At one time during his tenure, there were very serious attempts at the state level to eliminate the direct appropriations for public universities, including Temple.

Peter was a master strategist and outside-the-box thinker. His genius was his vision that Temple University could become a destination campus with strategic investments in facilities and ambience and the right kind of marketing. He had Tyler School of Art students design a new logo with a stylized "T" that quickly become iconic and continues to be a widely-recognized symbol internationally. He imagined a vibrant, residential campus full of activity day and night. In the face of the opposition of some, he envisioned a convocation/entertainment/athletics facility that would get people to step onto campus and experience first-hand Temple's excellence. Peter believed that once people were actually on campus, the University and its strong academics would sell themselves.

On January 25, 1996, there was a groundbreaking ceremony for that facility (now called The Liacouras Center). Since that date, Temple's undergraduate student body on Main Campus has grown by a phenomenal 90%. Trying to walk around campus during the times in between classes is now akin to navigating through Grand Central Station. The neighborhoods around the campus are bustling with commercial activity. Peter's vision of an anchor facility that would spark development not only on campus but also in the local community has become reality.

At the state level, Peter was a staunch defender of public higher education. In the 1990s he personally led a coalition of public universities to defeat attempts to drastically change the state's funding approach and to effectively turn Temple into a private university with no state appropriation. Peter knew that would have made Temple's tuition unaffordable for too many working-class students and would have resulted in an abandonment of our historic mission. Other public university presidents at the time credited Peter with saving public higher education.

Peter understood that academic excellence needs a sustainable, supportive infrastructure. Peter deserves our collective gratitude for laying the foundation to ensure that Temple's infrastructure is as strong as it is today.

Some final observations about Peter the person. He didn't shy away from conflict, yet still was a warm human being who was especially considerate of and sympathetic toward those who were most in need or most hurting. He supported the underdog, loved Philadelphia, never forgot his working-class roots, hated burdensome bureaucracies, championed diversity and was utterly committed to students. He showed me his true passion when he taught an undergraduate Intellectual Heritage course (now Mosaic), in addition to his law classes and a graduate class in higher education (which he co-taught with me) after stepping down from the presidency. He really was an academic at heart. And he was a dear friend, mentor and colleague not just to me but to numerous Temple people at all levels of the institution.

Peter Liacouras was Temple's president for 18 years, longer than any other Temple president except for our founder, Russell Conwell. Last Thursday, Peter passed away at the age of 85 after a long illness. Whenever you walk past the Liacouras Center or down Liacouras Walk, think of the man who bent history and had transformational dreams. His lasting legacy is an institution that is financially very stable, has the capacity to dream new dreams and continues to shape the flow of events for its own future.