

Cal State Northridge has come a long way in 50 years

By Connie Llanos, Staff Writer

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NORTHRIDGE - In a basement lab at California State University, Northridge, students don astronautlike white suits to study the tiniest of molecules.

Having a nanotechnology lab boasting \$100,000 microscopes represents a giant leap for a university that 50 years ago sprouted amid orange groves and squash fields.

"It was all temporary buildings then, maybe 2,000 people on the entire campus," said Vince Barabba, a member of the school's founding class. "It was a close-knit environment where students and faculty came together. It was a rare opportunity to start a college with a clean slate."

Now, as the school celebrates its 50th anniversary, it is also engaging in its largest construction boom ever, including the addition of a \$100 million performing arts center. And its enrollment has grown more than tenfold since those early days, reaching a record 36,600 this fall.

"We have had about 190,000 alums in 50 years. We are educating more teachers than the entire UC system and we are one of the largest employers in the San Fernando Valley, employing about 4,000 people," said CSUN President Jolene Koester. "This university has always been focused on this region."

But in many ways, the Valley's only public university is still a campus trying to find its way.

Koester's plans for the college include becoming a nationally recognized institution.

"Forever there have been conflicting visions of what this college should become," said John Broesamle, a former CSUN history professor and author of the book "Suddenly a Giant: A History of California State University, Northridge."

From its inception, founding members of the school saw CSUN as competitive with UCLA and the University of Southern California, he said.

A satellite version of the school started in 1955 out of rented space in San Fernando High School. The first president's office was out of his car's front seat, Broesamle said.

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CSUN's humble start, coupled with its suburban location, led many to think of the school as a small, semirural liberal arts college.

"But the small college in a rural environment was not sustainable," Broesamle said.

As the North Valley's fields gave way to tract homes, apartments and retail stores after World War II, CSUN also evolved.

The college began to plow its green space to make room for new classrooms, a library and student housing, and students began to ask for change inside the classroom.

By 1968, it felt its first round of growing pains when African-American and Chicano students, encouraged by the nation's ongoing civil rights movement, started protesting the school's lack of minorities.

Tensions reached a boiling point Nov. 4 that year when members of CSUN's Black Student Union accused a volunteer football coach of discrimination against a black football player.

They took over the fifth floor of the campus administration building. More than 100 LAPD officers were called in, and it all ended peacefully.

"It's ironic that the university that always aspired to national recognition was first recognized nationally as a fountainhead of student protests," Broesamle said.

As a result, CSUN created Pan-African Studies and Chicano/Chicana Studies departments as part of the agreement reached between student leaders and administrators.

Rudy Acuna, the founding faculty member for the Chicano/Chicana Studies Department, said getting the programs off the ground was difficult.

"Those first three years were hell," Acuna said. "Police were engaged in racial profiling. Originally even the Spanish Department objected to our program. They thought the programs would go away, but we kept pushing."

Today, the program serves 5,000 students a semester and is one of the largest of its kind in the country.

In 1994, CSUN was faced with a different kind of movement when the 6.7-magnitude Northridge Earthquake left most of the campus in rubble, with more than \$300 million worth of damage.

It reopened weeks later in temporary bungalows with a lower enrollment, but 14 years later it has fully recovered.

Looking ahead, the college faces many challenges. As the Valley continues to diversify, CSUN has to adjust its programs to its changing student body.

Tom Spencer-Walters, chairman of the Pan-African Studies Department, said while minority programs have flourished - now including

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departments for women's studies, Asian-American studies, Central-American studies and most recently queer studies - the recruitment of minority faculty continues to be an issue.

"If ethnic studies were not on the campus, we would not be meeting our diversity objectives with faculty," Spencer-Walters said.

The current state budget crunch is also a growing issue for a college where more than half of the students are on financial aid.

"When I registered in the fall of 2005 my fees, with everything included, were about \$1,500. ... Now they are almost \$2,000," said Raul Marquez, 21, a 21 year-old senior majoring in kinesiology.

"I know we are getting a new science building, parking structure and a performance hall, but it seems like an inordinate amount of money in a small time frame. I hope CSUN continues to think about the college as a center for education, not a business."

For many, like nanotechnology professor Henk Postma, the mission remains clear. A Caltech doctoral graduate, he could have taught students the intricacies of the nanometer at pretty much any college.

But the Netherlands native said CSUN held a special attraction for him.

"I like the fact that we are teaching these types of students who typically don't go to research institutions - first-generation students," he said.

"It's so important to engage these types of students."

connie.llanos@dailynews.com

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