

How Nicholas Zeppos transformed Vanderbilt as chancellor | Opinion

Nicholas Zeppos changed the Vanderbilt campus, university financial aid and much more, all for the better.

Michael Ainslie | Guest columnist 6:00 a.m. EDT June 18, 2019



- Michael Ainslie is a trustee emeritus of Vanderbilt University and a retired business leader..

Vanderbilt's Zeppos career is marked with highlights

Vanderbilt chancellor Nicholas Zeppos will step down this August.

Autumn Allison, Wochit

I entered Vanderbilt University in 1961 when Harvey Branscomb was chancellor.

I served as president of the Vanderbilt Student Government Association in 1965 working closely with Chancellor Alexander Heard. I joined the Vanderbilt Board of Trust in 1993 when Joe Wyatt was chancellor and was an active Board member under Gordon Gee and Nick Zeppos until my retirement from the Board of Trust in 2014. My love for Vanderbilt and all it stands for knows no bounds.

All of these remarkable leaders have been major contributors to Vanderbilt University's continuing upward trajectory. But one stands out in my opinion. [Chancellor Nicholas S. Zeppos, in his 11 years as chancellor](#) and six years as provost has moved Vanderbilt into the very highest echelons of America's great universities.

A Vanderbilt transformation

Zeppos led the Board of Trust through three major policy shifts that have made Vanderbilt University the school of choice for a growing portion of America's most talented faculty and most promising high school graduates.

As provost, Zeppos raised the idea of a first-year commons at the Peabody College of Education and Human Development. With the incredible financial support of Martha Ingram and her family, Vanderbilt revolutionized first year life with the creation of the Martha Rivers Ingram Commons. It not only became a model for other schools to strive for, it made life at Vanderbilt all

the better for Vandy students, leading to national accolades, including “happiest students in America” by Princeton Review.

With the Ingram Commons a success, Chancellor Zeppos pushed ahead to transform residential life for sophomores, juniors and seniors at Vanderbilt. With remarkable fund-raising success, he led the creation of two residential colleges on the old Kissam Quad site, a new Bronson Ingram Residential College and now the \$600 million construction of four more wonderful residential colleges along West End Avenue.

No loan policy refreshed the student body

His second major policy shift began in 2006 when he presented the Board of Trust with the idea of a no-loan policy for Vanderbilt. This radical idea slowly took hold as the Board came to understand the power of offering really bright kids, who would not otherwise have been able to afford to attend a university like Vanderbilt, the opportunity to get a Vanderbilt education and graduate with no debt.

Again, with amazing financial support from the board, the no-loan approach to financial aid became a reality in 2008 with the launch of Opportunity Vanderbilt. In a bold gesture, he and the Board of Trust proceeded ahead with implementation in the midst of the 2008 global recession.

The impact on Vanderbilt’s admissions has been nothing short of incredible. The quality of our applicants has shot upwards and we now compete effectively with Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford and Duke for the nation’s and world’s very best students regardless of their ability to pay.

Finally, beginning in 2012, Zeppos mooted the idea, some might say necessity, of [separating Vanderbilt University and the Vanderbilt University Medical Center](#). The reasons are many but suffice it to say that Vanderbilt was one of the last nationally recognized universities to accomplish this.

Zeppos sought advice from Michael Porter, a professor at Harvard Business School and national thought leader on strategy, particularly in medical institutions. Porter and Zeppos, along with Dr. Jeff Balser, led the Board of Trust through an exhaustive review of the lessons learned from similar separations at Duke, Harvard, Northwestern and Washington University in St. Louis.

In 2017 after much thoughtful deliberation, the separation was accomplished. In most people's minds, it strengthened both institutions while maintaining our close and invaluable partnership.

The future is secure

Vanderbilt University's endowment also grew substantially under Chancellor Zeppos. In 2008, it stood at \$2.9 billion and today it has risen to \$6.4 billion. This growth includes \$2.6 billion of new monies added to the endowment during his tenure.

I am confident that these and his many other accomplishments will create for Chancellor Nicholas S. Zeppos a rich and long-lasting legacy and the foundation for an incredibly bright future for the university. Vanderbilt is fortunate to have had this talented man at the helm.

Anchor down.

Michael Ainslie had a distinguished business career, serving as president and CEO of Sotheby's from 1984-94. He is a trustee emeritus of Vanderbilt University.



