she’s got it all—and then some. She’s at home before an audience. She’s experienced and truly handy at managing large complex organizations. We all should know her better—and be better for it. Read and enjoy.

Next, we introduce you to two more university presidents. Though neither Donnee Ramelli nor Frans Bax would likely have volunteered to follow Donna Shalala, you will no doubt read every word they have to say.

Their students are well beyond the 18-21 year-old age bracket—a considerable distance even from graduate students in their 20’s. Combined, they serve a clientele of perhaps 85,000 working adults—people whose skills and talents must be sharpened frequently, often continuously. With little need for much of the campus experience, each of their teaching and learning missions is in sharp focus.

You might ask yourself two questions as you read. How many of their students are your former students? How many of their students attend your institution today? —JEFF WENDT
Tugging, nudging, leading—all the way to excellence

Donna Shalala and the University of Miami. A perfect match. Everybody’s better as a result of it.

BY LARRY R. HUMES

Some friends accused Donna Shalala of taking the easy way out when she resigned as U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services in 2001 to accept the presidency of the University of Miami. The diminutive and energetic leader sees it differently.

She told attendees at a recent conference, “I like to describe myself as a tugboat captain, because it’s not easy to lead these institutions.” She has also said that in order to guide a major research university, it takes a world-class nudger.

“Cabinet agencies are hierarchical. They have a lot of fat and resources. Though the policy issues may be complex, government agencies are much easier to run than universities. Universities are not hierarchical. Who is in charge? Me? The faculty? The football coach?”

Managing colleges and universities is not for the faint of heart. But Shalala works in an environment that she loves and for which she feels particularly well suited. “I think of myself as a manager and leader of complex institutions,” says Shalala. “I would be terrible in a small college or working in a foundation. I’m better in places that have very complex problems that need to be thought through. And I’m not compulsive. This is an environment in which you just have to work your way through the issues, think ahead all the time, and anticipate. I’m also a very good crisis manager. And of course, my field is public policy. The opportunity to make decisions at the highest levels is what I enjoy doing.”

Presidency is not new to her

Shalala has enjoyed working in higher education for more than a quarter century. “I think Miami made a very good hire with her,” says Fred Frohock, professor and chair of UM’s political science department. “It’s unusual to get such a

“ Though the policy issues may be complex, government agencies are much easier to run than universities. Universities are not hierarchical. Who is in charge? Me? The faculty? The football coach?”
broad grasp and experience in a university president. She’s smart, competent, and she knows everybody. Rarely do you get the complete package.”

The complete package, indeed. Since her arrival, the university has initiated a host of construction projects. And the school is on the cusp of completing a $1 billion fund-raising campaign a year early. A host of celebrities including the Dalai Lama have visited the campus. The university hosted the first of the 2004 presidential debates. On the drawing board is a 1.4 million-square-foot bioscience research center.

“We’re doing master planning with the City of Miami at our medical center that involves expanding our research capacity and actually doubling the number of jobs,” adds Shalala. “We’re the largest private employer in Miami, an economic engine that creates not just jobs, but good jobs.” UM annually pumps $3.9 billion into the South Florida economy, concludes a study conducted by the Washington Economic Group.

Learner and teacher
Donna Shalala is a woman with ideas. And as one student observed: “When she gets an idea into her head, that idea gets done.” A native of Cleveland, Shalala attended public schools there and earned her bachelor’s degree in history from Western College for Women.

She says a semester in Washington D.C. and a two-year stint in the Peace Corps teaching English in an Iranian mud village got her interested in public policy.

She flirted with the idea of journalism. Instead she earned a doctorate from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University and embarked on an academic career.

“As an academic, I was very traditional. I got tenure at Columbia. I published and wrote. I had large grants to train PhD’s. It never occurred to me that I would ever be an administrator. I love teaching and I love research. Administration sort of caught up with me. It was not on my list of things that I was going to do.”

An interesting route into and out of Washington
The road forked in Shalala’s career path in the 1970s, and she began to develop a reputation for success in both government and higher education. From 1972 to 1979, she chaired the Program in Politics and Education at Columbia University. From 1975 to 1977, she also served as director and treasurer of New York City’s Municipal Assistance Corporation, which bailed out the nation’s largest bankrupt municipal government. In 1977, Washington called. President Jimmy Carter tapped Shalala to serve as assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Shalala became president of Hunter College (CUNY) in 1980 and served as its chief administrator for eight years. In 1987, she moved westward to be chancellor of the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Shalala was the first woman to head up a Big Ten university, which at that time was also the nation’s largest research university.

“Being at a Big Ten university was fun,” she remembers. “And leading a huge research university was also fun. I adored the place, and I would not have left if the President of the United States hadn’t asked me.”

When she visited Washington, she turned down Bill Clinton’s offer of the Secretary of Education post, and agreed to serve as Secretary of Health and Human Services. During her eight-year tenure at HHS, Shalala directed the welfare reform process, made health insurance available to an estimated 3.3 million children, raised child immunization rates to the highest levels in history, revitalized the National Institutes of Health, and directed a major management and policy reform of Medicare. In fact, Shalala says they accomplished just about everything she and the President set out to do except universal health care.

Shalala knew that she would return to academia. “The Miami thing came up and it looked like a wonderful opportunity,” she relates. “I knew the place, because my grandparents and my cousins had lived in Miami. The trustees were very persuasive that it was a place that wanted to get better.”

Pursuing excellence and diversity
Shalala’s goal for the University of Miami can be stated simply. She intends to make it a world-class university. “We want to move our medical center into the top 25 such centers in the country. We will become one of the great research universities in this country. We’re very good, and we’re recruiting the best faculty, the best students and building first-class facilities.”
Miami’s students are 28 percent Hispanic, 10 percent African-American and another 10 percent are citizens of other countries, and Shalala is understandably pleased about it. “One of our African-American students said to me, ‘There are so many African-American students here, I don’t even have to like them all!’ Without diversity you might move your school up in the U.S. News rankings. But if you’re serious about preparing students, not for their first job, but for their third or fourth job, then they have to be able to operate and talk with people from different backgrounds, across cultures and across languages. They must be comfortable with people who are different.”

Ask people to describe the kind of president Shalala is, and the words “student-focused” come up early in the conversation. She is seen most everywhere on campus, sometimes in the company of her mutt, Sweetie, and students feel free to e-mail her about problems or to seek advice.

“She’s innovative and energetic, a very student-centered president,” adds VP for student affairs Pat Whitley. “On her first day, as we walked around campus, she asked: ‘Where does everybody sit?’ She immediately started installing patios, lots of chairs and umbrellas. The campus has a much friendlier feeling to it. She likes fun. At the same time, this is a very academic, research-oriented university.”

**Energetic and approachable**

Student Government Association president Peter Maki says, “She’s the president of a school with 10,000 plus students, but I imagine that everyone has met her at least once during their time here. You can invite her to most any event and there’s a good chance she’ll show up.” Whitley says Shalala enjoys a sort of celebrity status on campus.

“They have a great affection for her. They know that she cares about them.”

Shalala says that some of her best ideas come from students, so she tries to balance a short-term strategy with long-term planning. “Too many leaders in higher education are wonderful long-term planners. But they forget that students who are currently on campus won’t see the results of that planning, and they need short-term successes.”

Every summer, we try to accomplish something on campus that will please students when they come back in the fall. Sometimes it’s small things like patios. It might be a Starbucks in the library or making our washers and dryers free. One year, the students wanted ice machines in the residence halls. They’re expensive, but it was important to them, so it was important to us.”

Shalala is sensitive to the needs of the faculty. Stephen Sapp, who chairs the religious studies department and serves as vice-chair of the faculty senate, says the president attends the beginning of each faculty meeting and answers any and all questions in a straightforward manner. He is not aware of any conflicts that have occurred between her and the faculty.

“Some facility-focused short-term successes are also advisable,” says Shalala. “A faculty club had been delayed here for years for one long-term reason or another. So one of the first things I did was walk the campus with the provost and locate a space right in the middle of the campus that we could convert over the summer. Faculty members were involved in the process, and they’re delighted. If we had waited for the campus plan to be executed, it would still be 10 years off.”

**A management style to go for the best**

“I’m a touchy-feely type of person, but truth be told, with 25 years spent here, I’d rather have someone at the helm who is going to make the university the very best she can and not spend as much time worrying about making friends with faculty or being liked,” says Sapp. He adds that an associate, who once worked for Shalala at HHS, told him: “Donna Shalala doesn’t want to be associated with anything that isn’t the very best.” I think that pretty well captures the essence of who she is.”

“I hire good people and I delegate,” Shalala says. “I try not to micro-manage. I make sure that the people have the authority to do the job, and then I back them up, whether I would have done it exactly like they did or not.”

“She’s easy to work with if you are competent and you want to work hard and you can get things done quickly,” adds Whitley. “You don’t linger with a Donna Shalala idea. There’s no time for reflection. She’s making a 24 X 7 commitment, and the people working around her should be also. It’s really fun working with her and lots of things get accomplished.”

The upbeat, high-energy president seems to enjoy almost every aspect of her job, including fund-raising, which she says gives her ‘the opportunity to brag about the university. When asked what she dislikes most about her job, she replies without hesitation: “hurricanes.” Hurricane Rita had closed the campus the prior day as it passed over the nearby Florida Keys.

And what is the next challenge for Donna Shalala? “People ask me that question all the time,” she replies, matter-of-factly. “And I tell them I don’t have a clue. But I’ve stayed in jobs long enough that no one has ever complained that I didn’t have a lasting impact while I was there.”