

# The Transformative Power of Higher Education

An Interview with Maurie McInnis, President, Stony Brook University

**EDITORS' NOTE** Maurie McInnis is the sixth president of Stony Brook University. Appointed in July 2020, McInnis also oversees Stony Brook Medicine, Long Island's premier academic medical center. She is a key player in furthering economic development on Long Island and in Stony Brook's role as part of the management team of nearby Brookhaven National Laboratory, a U.S. Department of Energy facility. A renowned cultural historian and author, McInnis' academic scholarship has focused on race, slavery, and power in the 19th century American South. Before coming to Stony Brook, she served four years as executive vice president and provost at the University of Texas at Austin and spent nearly 20 years at the University of Virginia in various academic and administrative appointments. McInnis earned a BA degree in art history from the University of Virginia and a PhD in the history of art from Yale University.



Maurie McInnis

a purposeful, actionable path forward for student success to graduation and beyond, I was deeply motivated and incredibly excited. Since my arrival in 2020, I have witnessed a university that works across disciplines to build a vibrant future for its entire community. Stony Brook continues every day to redefine itself with innovation, knowledge, justice, and equity at the core of its mission. It is a university simultaneously dedicated to the success of its diverse student body and to making the world a better place through innovative research.

My strongest first impressions were of the commitment everyone associated with Stony Brook has to this institution. Among faculty, staff, healthcare workers, students, and alumni there was and continues to be an overwhelmingly strong passion that speaks volumes to the role Stony Brook plays in the communities it serves.

**How do you define the role of a public university president and what are the keys to being effective in the role?**

The primary role of a public university president is building support for and advancing the institution's mission with its constituencies across campus as well as the external diverse publics it serves. Public higher education has a responsibility to be a driver of equity for all students from all backgrounds, and this is particularly true at a public research university like Stony Brook, which is consistently ranked high for elevating the social mobility of its graduates and their families. Stony Brook is also focused on innovative research and serving as a powerful engine for economic development, technological innovation, clinical care and cultural enrichment on Long Island.

The pandemic era has certainly revealed to the world just how much we have and will continue to rely on the curiosity-driven research of public universities to answer society's call in times of crisis. Stony Brook has always understood that innovating with purpose drives positive change. We are passionate about our role in the community; our mission is to engage in the work that will benefit Stony Brook, Long Island, New York, and beyond, and we take that very seriously.

**UNIVERSITY BRIEF** Stony Brook ([stonybrook.edu](http://stonybrook.edu)), one of America's most dynamic public universities, is New York's flagship university and #1 public university. Stony Brook is part of the State University of New York (SUNY) system, a center of academic excellence and an internationally recognized research institution that offers all students a world-class education.

**What interested you in the opportunity to lead Stony Brook University and made you feel it was the right fit?**

Long before I joined Stony Brook University, I was familiar with its strengths in research and healthcare. And well beyond New York State, Stony Brook had a reputation for delivering a world-class, affordable education to a diverse student population, many who are the first in their families to attend college. I wanted to be a part of a university community where equity and excellence were deeply ingrained in its culture, which was evident in Stony Brook's consistent rankings as a national leader for elevating the social mobility of its graduates.

The last decade has presented higher education with an important opportunity to be a driver of equity. When I was offered the opportunity to lead Stony Brook University, an organization with



Maurie McInnis with the Stony Brook Women's Basketball team





*Maurie McInnis at the announcement of The New York Climate Exchange on New York's Governors Island*

It is a priority to be a good neighbor in the communities we serve and a responsible steward of state resources. For Stony Brook, doing so requires relationship building and partnerships at the local, state and national levels, including close collaboration with SUNY Chancellor John King and our legislative leaders to support their priorities for New York State.

Earlier this year, Stony Brook received a historic \$500 million endowment gift from the Simons Foundation, a private philanthropy working to advance the frontiers of research in mathematics and the basic sciences, along with Simons Foundation International. New York State will match the first \$200 million of the Simons Foundation gift with an additional \$100 million for Stony Brook's endowment. The state endowment match illustrates the power of university-community partnerships at the state level and also shows the importance of donor relationships that support our progress forward as New York's flagship for the future.

**How important is it for Stony Brook University to build a diverse and inclusive student population?**

In 2023, we face a challenging world of deeply entrenched inequities that disproportionately impact marginalized groups, including a climate emergency, health disparities, extreme housing and food insecurity, the fraying of democratic norms, and a long-overdue racial reckoning. And in higher education nationally, there remain stark disparities in degree attainment and employment outcomes between historically advantaged groups and historically disadvantaged groups, particularly students from lower-income families and underrepresented racial and ethnic populations. Despite higher education's capacity to be the most powerful pathway for socioeconomic mobility, not all Americans have equal access to it.

Recently, I participated in a panel on the Boyer 2030 Commission Report, "The Equity/Excellence Imperative: A 2030 Blueprint for Undergraduate Education at U.S. Research Universities." University leaders from across the country discussed strategies for nurturing equity within our respective institutions, returning to the fact that equity and excellence are mutually dependent. The report notes that for a research institution to reach its highest levels of excellence, it must nurture diverse perspectives and equitable practices that empower underrepresented students to help shape our collective



*Maurie McInnis with Simons STEM Scholars students*

future. For an institution to be truly equitable, the education it offers must be excellent and competitive. To quote from the report, "excellence without equity (privilege reproducing privilege) is not true excellence, and equity (mere access) without excellence is unfulfilled promise."

I am proud that Stony Brook University embraces this imperative. We remain one of the top schools in the nation for promoting socio-economic mobility and must continue to be laser-focused on fostering equity and diversity within our world-class programs.

Stony Brook University's mission, vision and very essence are built on the principles of providing equal access to a world-class education in a caring environment. They frame our efforts to promote diversity, inclusion, and equity as central to what it means to provide high-quality, comprehensive education, research, leadership, and healthcare. This is how we look to celebrate diversity and position the University in the global community.

**What was your vision for creating the Stony Brook Simons STEM Scholars Program?**

The Simons STEM Scholars Program is one of many partnerships that we have established with the Simons Foundation and supports exceedingly high-achieving high school graduates to reach their potential, bringing a new, much-needed diverse perspective to science and innovation. Our inaugural cohort of Scholars arrived this summer, and I had the honor of spending time with them recently. We talked about their role in helping solve the most challenging issues of our time and Stony Brook's commitment to them as they prepare to be the next generation of researchers and experts who will innovate with purpose, integrity, breadth of perspective, and diversity of experience.



Funded by a \$56.6 million donation from the Simons Foundation and Simons Foundation International, the Simons STEM Scholars Program will provide four years of scholarship covering all education costs; on-campus housing; academic, career, peer and faculty mentoring; internship and research opportunities; alumni support and outreach; and stipends to cover program-related travel and study abroad opportunities.

Approximately 800 students applied to participate in the program and 29 were selected. Future Simons STEM Scholars will be inducted in groups of 50, but the inaugural class was condensed to 29 to better pilot the program. The number and quality of applicants we received in this inaugural year reinforces the positive impact this program will have on the science and math communities. The selected scholars' SAT scores represent the top one percent in the nation. Roughly 90 percent of

the selected students are New York residents. Life science and engineering are the most popular majors among the group, with other students opting for social science, applied sciences, or math and physics.

From volunteering at hospitals to tutoring and mentoring younger students, the inaugural Simons STEM Scholars also share a commitment to service that sets them apart in the academic sphere and beyond. We are grateful to the Simons Foundation for its vision and partnership in making the Simons STEM Scholars Program a reality.

**Will you discuss the President's Innovation and Excellence Fund that you launched in 2021?**

The \$75 million Presidential Innovation and Excellence (PIE) Fund is fully supported by philanthropic gifts to enhance Stony Brook's externally funded research. Our partners believe as wholeheartedly as I do that Stony Brook is an institution that can develop innovative solutions to the world's most critical challenges. PIE funds were instrumental in supporting our winning bid as we were selected as the anchor institution to develop the New York Climate Exchange on Governors Island, reimagining it as a global hub for climate science research and innovation. The PIE Fund supported recruitment of world-renowned faculty, including Nobel Prize-winning physicist Barry Barish and Ivet Bahar, our director and chair of the Laufer Center for Physical and Quantitative Biology. PIE funds also enabled collaborative work between Stony Brook University and neighboring Brookhaven National Laboratory, a U.S. Department of Energy facility.

PIE Fund investments are supporting our faculty's leadership in several of Stony Brook's areas of strength, such as climate science, clean energy, and quantum information science



*Maurie McInnis speaking at Stony Brook University*

technology. In April 2023, we announced a \$10 million investment in PIE Fund monies to transform the care of the aging in Suffolk County and across Long Island by creating the Stony Brook Center For Healthy Aging (CHA), a hub of basic, translational, and clinical research. As Baby Boomers age, the number of older people is rapidly increasing, and the opportunities to discover advances in health, well-being and quality of life for this population is a critical unmet need that the CHA will address, both here on Long Island and beyond.

**You also oversee Stony Brook Medicine. Will you provide an overview of Stony Brook Medicine and how you define its mission?**

Stony Brook Medicine (SBM) is the leading provider of high-quality healthcare for communities throughout Long Island. SBM integrates and elevates all of Stony Brook University's health-related initiatives: education, research and patient care. It includes our Health Sciences schools: the Renaissance School of Medicine, the School of Dental Medicine, the School of Health Professions, the School of Nursing and the School of Social Welfare – and the Program in Public Health.

The award-winning patient care we provide comes from Stony Brook University Hospital, Stony Brook Children's Hospital, Stony Brook Southampton Hospital, Stony Brook Eastern Long Island Hospital, Long Island State Veterans Home, and more than 200 community-based healthcare settings throughout Suffolk County.

SBM's mission is to provide world-class, compassionate care to our patients, advance our understanding of the origins of human health and disease, and educate the healthcare professionals and biomedical investigators of the future so they can bring the fruits of scientific discovery to our patients.

We integrate the values of integrity, compassion, accountability, respect and excellence in all we do: whether it is through how we educate our students or how we administer treatment to our patients.

**What do you see as the keys to effective leadership and how do you describe your management style?**

One of the most essential roles of an effective leader is growing and nurturing an outstanding leadership team. Once we've recruited great talent to join our university to build a diverse team – diverse across many dimensions – effective leadership requires investment in the professional development and growth of members of the team. Modeling this behavior is certainly important for a university president.

I am a strong believer in being transparent and inclusive; listening, learning, engaging, and collaborating. Leading an institution as big

and complex as Stony Brook University requires many different individuals working together as one cohesive unit. I like to work by building a team made up of diverse talent and people who have varying viewpoints to share and areas of expertise very different from mine. For me, it's all about building relationships and listening to many different perspectives on an issue. And I am thrilled to be at an institution that is built on and values respect for diversity and a desire to be inclusive.

**Did you always know that you wanted to pursue a career in education?**

My great-grandparents were teachers in a two-room schoolhouse in rural Frostproof, Florida. My grandfather was a teacher and principal, and my parents were both college professors. So as a fourth-generation educator, perhaps you could say I am just continuing in the family business.

Yet, education as my life's work was not originally part of my master plan. My initial life plan was to become a physician. However, halfway through college, I abandoned that goal to major in art history. I often attribute this transformation to the profundity and the serendipity of a multidisciplinary undergraduate experience: the discovery of a new passion through exploration.

For me, that decision was life changing. In fact, I doubt I would be here today as president of Stony Brook without it.

This summer, I was talking with the students in our inaugural class of Simon STEM Scholars. I encouraged them to embrace the unknown and be open to serendipity, to those unexpected opportunities that initially feel like diversions from the path forward. These discoveries can lead to something unimaginably better and brighter. I am living proof of this. ●