

# Transformation U

An Interview with Dr. Nido R. Qubein, President, High Point University

**EDITORS' NOTE** Dr. Nido Qubein became the seventh President of High Point University in January 2005. Since that time, enrollment has quadrupled, campus has expanded from 90 to 520 acres, and academic schools have grown from 3 to 14. Qubein came to the United States as a teenager with limited knowledge of English and only \$50 before going on to build business partnerships in banking, real estate, publishing, and retail businesses.



Dr. Nido R. Qubein

Prior to his role as HPU President, Qubein rose to prominence as an internationally known author and consultant who has given more than 7,500 presentations worldwide. He has served on the corporate boards of several Fortune 500 companies including Truist, the sixth largest bank in the nation, La-Z-Boy, and FinThrive Healthcare. Qubein is also executive chairman of the Great Harvest Bread Company. Among numerous honors and recognitions he has received, Qubein is an inductee of the Horatio Alger Association for Distinguished Americans, along with Oprah Winfrey and Colin Powell.

**UNIVERSITY BRIEF** Founded in 1924, High Point University ([highpoint.edu](http://highpoint.edu)) is a liberal arts institution located in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina. "America's Best Colleges" 2025 Edition, published by U.S. News & World Report, ranks HPU #1 among all regional colleges in the South (the thirteenth consecutive year at number one). It also ranked HPU for the tenth consecutive year as the #1 Most Innovative Regional College in the South for innovation in curriculum, faculty, students, campus life, technology, and facilities. HPU was named for the fourteenth consecutive year to the national "Colleges of Distinction" list. HPU also earned Fields of Study distinctions for the Phillips School of Business and the Stout School of Education. The Princeton Review named High Point University as one of the nation's top institutions for undergraduate education. The Princeton Review also named HPU in the 2024 edition of "The Best 390 Colleges" and on the Best Southeastern Colleges "2025 Best Colleges: Region by Region" list. HPU was also recognized among the Top 20 in the nation for Best-Run Colleges, Best Career Services, Most Beautiful Campus, Most Active Student Government Association,

Best College Dorms, and Best Campus Food, as well as a Great School for Business/Finance Majors and a Great School for Communication Majors.

## Will you discuss your career journey?

I came to this country on a one-way ticket as a teenage immigrant seeking an education. When I arrived, I had a limited English vocabulary and little money in my pocket. My father died when I was six years old, and that was tough for me. My mother played a pivotal role in my life. She had only a fourth-grade education, but she had a post-graduate degree in wisdom and uncommon sense. She insisted I go to school in the United States and pursue the American Dream.

I came to America to attend college and had the words of my mother still ringing in my ears: "If you want to be a great person, you have to walk side by side and hand in hand with great people." While I was in college, I worked as a youth counselor and sought out leadership materials that would help youth counselors grow professionally. I couldn't find

any, so I started a business to provide leadership materials for people like myself. I also began leading seminars and giving speeches, and my career began to grow in those areas. As soon as I finished graduate school, I started my first business following the principles that built America: personal initiative, the entrepreneurial spirit, and the ability to pursue new opportunities. These are all things we sometimes take for granted but, as an immigrant, I understand and value them tremendously.

I started other businesses and went on to write books, consult with corporate leaders, and speak at conferences. Over the years, I'm blessed to have given more than 7,500 presentations worldwide. I served on corporate boards of several Fortune 500 companies, including Truist, the sixth largest financial company in the nation, La-Z-Boy, and Savista. I'm now in my 21st year as president of High Point University, my alma mater.

## Did you always know that you had an entrepreneurial spirit and desire to build your own businesses?

I came to this country seeking an education and got it. First, in my formal schooling;



High Point University



*HPU is ranked #9 Best Career Services in the nation by The Princeton Review. Cottrell Hall, pictured here, serves as a center for professional development on campus and houses HPU's Office of Career and Professional Development, Entrepreneurship Center, Office of Undergraduate Research and Creative Works, and much more.*

second, from the people and the culture; and third, through my own experiences in business. In my adopted home, I discovered what I have come to believe is the greatest education in the world: creating business ventures from nothing but seeds of clear ideas and strong principles planted in the good soil of American possibility.

At HPU, we believe in the art of the possible and seek to instill it in every student. We believe that having an entrepreneurial spirit is not just about building a widget and selling it. Rather, having an entrepreneurial mindset is about building appreciated value and rendering it for your client, consumer, congregation or company. Everyone needs it to thrive. That's why we passionately celebrate hard work, perseverance and personal initiative. It's what built this country in the first place.

I am a product of the American Dream, and so is our campus. We firmly believe that those who work hard and are smart enough, and those who have faith and courage, can accomplish great things.

**“Our goal is  
to prepare graduates  
not for the world as it  
is, but as it will be.”**

**How did your time as a leader in business impact the way you lead High Point University?**

I never expected nor sought to become president of High Point University, but when the Board of Trustees asked me to in 2004, I prayerfully considered it and accepted the challenge. As a graduate of High Point University whose life was deeply and positively impacted by earning an education, and as a parent of four children, I began to understand the impact that this university can have on the next generation of leaders. As a university president with a business background, I knew we needed to provide a fundamentally different type of education to our students. After all, today's college students don't just need a degree. They require a transformational experience that prepares them to thrive in a constantly shifting marketplace. We began to focus on instilling Premier Life Skills in students – the kind that ensure they can navigate ambiguity, adapt in rapidly changing conditions, solve complex problems, communicate well, and represent the

organization where they work at the highest level. These are skills that employers now say many college graduates across the nation lack. These are also the skills that employers say are the hardest to teach once they hire new college graduates. Today, I lead a transformed institution aimed at investing in our students' lives for the better. Our goal is to prepare graduates not for the world as it is, but as it will be.

### **What do you see as the fundamentals of effective leadership?**

A leader must define a clear vision, develop a solid strategy, execute consistently, and interpret value. These are the fundamentals of effective leadership. It's what I strive to focus on in all my work. I make myself available to students, parents, faculty, staff, alumni, and the community. I answer my emails. It's not delegated. I meet with faculty and staff frequently to learn more about their areas of focus and to ensure the university is appropriately allocating resources. A leader can't allocate resources effectively without a vertical and diagonal understanding of each business unit.

If I'm going to make decisions about the future of the institution, then I have to believe I've assessed the risks and understand the potential benefits of those decisions. While I look at trends in higher education, such as some colleges and universities losing enrollment, our school is growing by leaps and bounds. We had the largest enrollment in our school's history this fall and welcomed the largest class of new students. One of the keys to overcoming the downward decline is our focus on student success. We give students the tools they need to achieve success and significance in business and in life. I enjoy teaching the entire freshman class in my First-Year Seminar on Life Skills, and some of the pertinent principles I share with them include having a clear vision that can be stated in 15 words or less, having a solid strategy and striving for consistent execution.

I want education to transform our students' lives as it has transformed mine. I have written books that provide a complete blueprint for success. It doesn't happen overnight. It takes meaningful effort, passionate ambition and intense vision to develop a plan for personal success and professional growth. These are all qualities I use in my daily life.

### **How have you driven High Point's transformation and what are your priorities for HPU as you look ahead?**

When I arrived at HPU in 2005, I knew the university had to distinguish itself. We had to transform our campus and our culture in order to transform the lives of our students. As Richard Rohr, the Franciscan priest, said, "Transformed people transform people." Twenty years ago, I defined a clear vision and asked faculty and staff to join me in moving HPU from an ocean of sameness to a small pool of distinction. We became student focused. We didn't make a single decision without asking how something served the best needs of the student. Our campus culture is energized by the challenge to take HPU to new heights. During a short period of time that ordinarily would take decades to achieve, we became a highly ranked institution

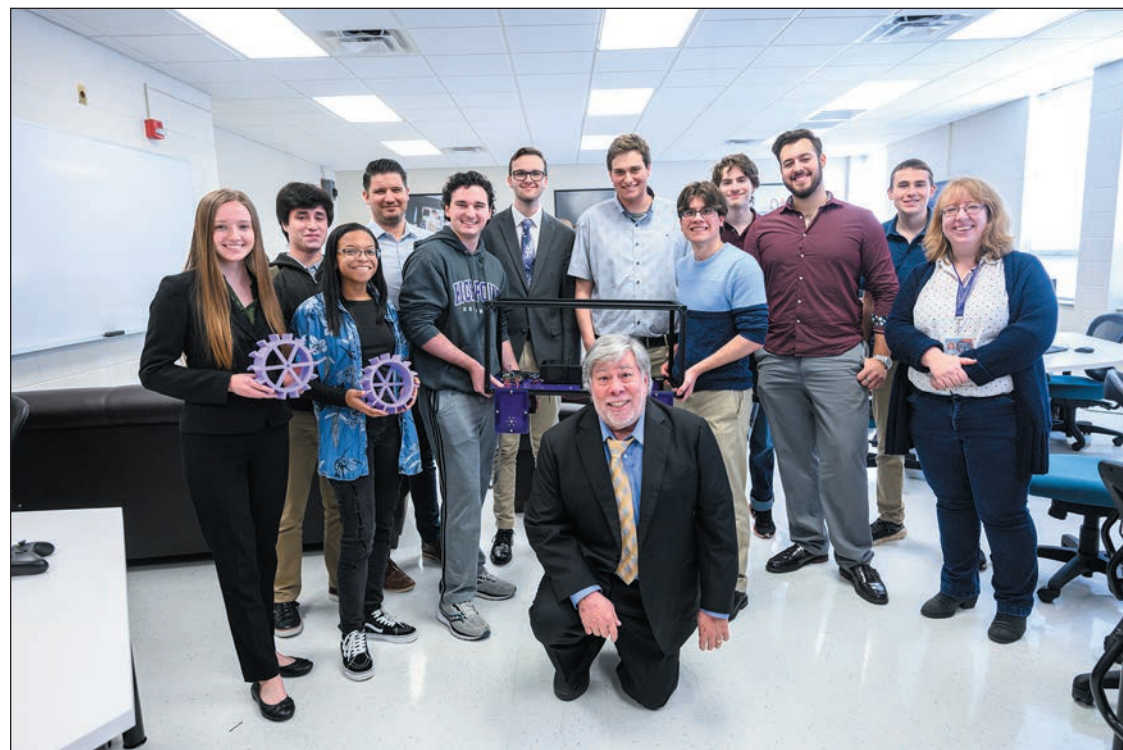
where enrollment has grown from just 1,500 to 6,335. We expanded our campus from 90 to more than 520 acres. And academic schools grew from just 4 to 13, with plans to add another with the opening of a School of Optometry. To do that in such a compressed amount of time is unheard of in higher education. We moved beyond focusing on the "product" – the diploma. Instead, we chose to focus on the product of the product – a life filled with meaningful success and framed with purposeful significance. And it worked. Consider the fact that 99 percent of our graduates are employed or in graduate school within 180 days of graduating. That's 14 points higher than the national average, and that's why we do what we do.

While we don't do what we do for accolades, HPU has received an abundance of national recognition along the way. *The Princeton Review* ranked HPU as the #1 Best-Run College in the nation in its "The Best 390 Colleges: 2025 Edition" publication. HPU was also recognized among the Top 20 in the nation for Best College Dorms, Best Career Services, Most Active Student Government, Best Campus Food and Most Beautiful Campus. *U.S. News & World Report* has ranked HPU as the #1 "Best Regional College in the South" for 13 consecutive years and the #1 Most Innovative College in the South for 10 consecutive years. But most importantly, HPU has become a place of deep, intentional mentorship that leads students through a personal, transformational process that enhances their lives. I remind faculty and staff that "we live, students watch and students learn." Students need heroes, models and mentors to positively influence their lives and increase their impact. Today, our incredible growth has been shared by so many parents, students, and media outlets that some even refer to us as Transformation U.

### **How do leading universities need to adapt and evolve to prepare students for success in the workforce of the future?**

How did you do it, is the question I have received from the 400 college presidents who have visited HPU's campus to study our success. I tell them it's a mix of several factors, but the focus is on helping students develop Life Skills in an extraordinary environment with caring people. We need to show parents that there is value in their students earning a college degree. At High Point University, we are committed to giving students the Premier Life Skills and the values-based education that prepare them to thrive and render value in a world that changes faster than you can download the latest app. We want them to decipher the difference between sound bites and sound judgment and to develop a depth of awareness and relevance. Their success is our success and our greatest reward. By integrating rigorous academic programs, experiential learning opportunities, real-world experiences and strong community engagement, HPU delivers a comprehensive educational experience that meets the demands of the modern job market.

Our students get many opportunities to network with potential employers through various career fairs on campus, as well as off-campus programs such as HPU in the City which take students to major metropolitan areas such as New York, Boston, Dallas and Washington, D.C. to network with major companies. We also foster intellectual growth and practical application of knowledge through the university's Summer Research Institute (SuRI), Summer Research Programs in the Sciences (SuRPS), and Summer Research Fellowship (SuRF). Collectively, all of these programs provide a mighty boost to a student's skill set in a short window.



*Steve Wozniak visits with a robotics class in January 2023 through High Point University's Access to Innovators program*



*HPU's men's basketball team competing at Qubein Center*

**HPU refers to itself as “The Premier Life Skills University.” What does this phrase mean to you and how does HPU drive this mission throughout the university?**

A college education should not only focus on the attainment of a diploma. An extraordinary, holistic education should be about professional development and personal transformation, too. In the First-Year Seminar on Life Skills that I teach for all freshmen, I share with our students that life is about both success and significance. Significance offers greater clarity and reflects the influence and impact you have on others. Yes, we must feed the minds of our students, but we must also feed their hearts. To support graduates in their career trajectories, HPU offers various resources, including success coaches, career advisers, micro-credential offerings and even professional LinkedIn photo sessions. In fact, our Office of Career and Professional Development is ranked #9 in the nation by *The Princeton Review*. These initiatives align with the university's overarching goal of equipping students with the skills they need to thrive in competitive job markets. For instance, critical thinking ranks among the most sought-after skills in the business world. According to the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Survey, 73 percent of organizations prioritize creative and critical thinking when assessing talent. HPU's curriculum is designed to nurture these skills, ensuring graduates possess not only technical expertise, but also the adaptability and problem-solving capabilities necessary to lead in an ever-evolving environment.

A day rarely passes when global leaders aren't on our campus connecting with students. Nowhere else do college students regularly learn from so many top experts in their field, such as Apple Computer Co-Founder Steve Wozniak – HPU's Innovator in Residence; Netflix

Co-Founder Marc Randolph – HPU's Entrepreneur in Residence; Dallas Mavericks' CEO Cynt Marshall – HPU's Sports Executive in Residence; Domino's CEO Russell Weiner – HPU's Corporate Executive in Residence; former U.S. Ambassador and FCC Chairman William Kennard – HPU's Global Leader in Residence, and many others who've led some of the most recognizable organizations in the world. This is part of our intentional Access to Innovators program, one of many educational hallmarks at HPU.

At the same time, our campus is filled with laboratories and real-world studios that are often referred to as Ivy League-level facilities. Our students have access to these labs as soon as they arrive on campus and don't need to wait until they're upperclassmen to use them like at larger universities. Inside them, students work tirelessly to conduct research, produce creative works, master the latest technology, invent new ways of doing things and tirelessly practice scenarios that students will encounter in the workforce.

**You recently published another book, *Extraordinary Transformation*. What interested you in writing the book and what are the key messages you wanted to convey in the book?**

*Extraordinary Transformation* is really an autobiographical account of how we applied business and leadership principles to grow and re-imagine HPU as a nationally recognized institution of higher learning. And I'm just as excited about the future of HPU as I am proud of what we've accomplished in the previous 20 years. I wanted to share lessons I learned during my two decades and counting as HPU's president and offer innovative strategies that have sparked the university's incredible growth in size and academic stature. I discuss how when I first arrived, I met with the faculty to share my vision to make HPU

a nationally and internationally known university. I told them I had developed skills and core competencies in my business career that could help and that I was not only a proud alumnus of this university, but also a loyal and longtime citizen of High Point, a city I had come to love as my own. And finally, I told them I had been someone who believed passionately in the value and impact of education all my life. The entire body of faculty supported the idea and vision of a businessman with experience in how to grow businesses and make them thrive. Next, I visited the campus to get the experience of a 19-year-old student walking across the promenade. I sought the perspectives of students and parents before mapping out changes and solutions to become the place they wanted it to be and the exceptional educational experience we envisioned. I sought to remove barriers sometimes caused by bureaucratic processes and challenged our faculty to be laser-focused on student success.

In short, they answered the call. We grew from approximately 100 faculty in 2005 to nearly 500 today. Our campus is now home to dozens of state-of-the-art facilities in business, dental medicine, physical therapy, engineering, law, and others, and we offer robust support services to our students. And our students graduate with impressive graduate school and career outcomes.

To learn the pulse and the culture of an organization, the leader must stay informed and involved, engaged and accessible. I wanted this book to serve as an entrepreneurial blueprint for any leader who seeks to start a new organization or grow a proven brand that could use fresh ideas. Another reward is that all proceeds from the book go to support HPU student scholarships.

**With all that you have achieved during your career, and with the success of HPU, do you think about slowing down?**

I've always been a hard worker. It's just my nature, the way I'm built. I tend to wake up around 5 AM each day full of energy to exercise, read emails and the news. I arrive to campus by 7 AM, then fill my days with meetings and activities, such as filming the weekly PBS NC “Side by Side” interview show that I host. I enjoy interacting with students, faculty, staff and attending many HPU athletic events. Civic efforts for the surrounding community also require my attention, including revitalization of center-city High Point with a ballpark and opening the Nido and Mariana Qubein Children's Museum in 2022.

What I find most rewarding is the opportunity to positively influence and impact the lives of others, particularly the students of High Point University and their families. I live by the rule of thirds, which I also teach to all freshmen in my first-year seminar: Life is one-third learning, one-third earning, and one-third serving.

HPU is in a constant state of transformation, so every day is exciting. I'm focused on ensuring that HPU is prepared to serve students and their families for generations to come. I'm focused on ensuring the city of High Point is positioned to thrive as a vibrant and energetic city. I'm focused on planting seeds of greatness in the minds, hearts, and souls of all those I'm blessed to encounter. I'm excited about what lies ahead. ●