By Art Jahnke

In his first five years, BU President Robert A. Brown has made the future part of everybody’s job.

Did you hear the one about the engineer who rebuilt BU?
Here were two things Robert Brown promised himself he would not get caught up in when he was considering taking the job of president of Boston University. "One was what the Globe had written about the University and John Silber," says Brown. "The other was trying to understand the place before I had to commit. It was too complicated for that."

The first item, Brown knew, was a requirement for anyone hoping to shepherd BU into the 21st century. Silber (Hon.’95), the University’s president from 1971 to 1996 and later chancellor, had been a walking lightning rod for the Globe, and seemed to revel in the philosophical clashes with the press and political opponents, not to mention his faculty. And when Silber stepped out of firing range, the Board of Trustees stepped in and gave the press something else to take potshots at: in 2003, the board paid former NASA director Daniel Goldin, whom they had signed on as president, $1.8 million to walk away just before he was set to begin the job. By the time a new presidential search committee started talking to Brown in spring 2005, many observers of higher education were not looking at Boston University as a model of executive leadership.

The second item on Brown’s short list of things to steer clear of presented a curious personal anomaly. Because while most leaders of billion-dollar enterprises want to avoid complexity, Brown, a provost and former chemical engineer and applied mathematician at MIT, is in love with it. An organization with 17 schools and colleges, 32,000 students, more than 8,600 employees, and a budget of $1.7 billion offered an irresistible opportunity for analysis and synergies. “I have always enjoyed dealing with the complexity,” says Brown. “I made the transition from complicated physical systems to the complexity of the academic organization.”

At BU, however, there was more than physical complexity to deal with. There were politics, and the shards of unresolved issues were likely to pop up anytime, anywhere, like targets in a Whack-A-Mole game. “There were dead cats everywhere,” Brown recalls. “And nobody wanted to bury them.”

Ultimately, he says, he dealt with the complexity by following Albert Einstein’s famous advice to physicists: “Things should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.”

It worked. Today, five and a half years into Brown’s tenure, the University has seen four years of record surpluses, money that has made it possible to put $172 million into building new dorms and renovating old ones, and $100 million into modernizing classrooms and labs. The University has increased financial aid to students by $32.8 million, bringing the total allocated to financial aid to $277.4 million annually. And his commitment to research and his efforts to build an infrastructure to support that research helped increase sponsored program awards by 33 percent from the time of his arrival, to $407.8 million in 2010. Alumni gifts have also set new records: prior to Brown’s presidency, the University had had only one gift of more than $10 million. Since he took office, six large gifts account for more than $60 million.

In September, the many positive changes that Brown has brought to BU were officially recognized when the Board of Trustees expressed the hope that he would continue doing what he had been doing for another five years. Brown said yes.

First Moves

As Einstein might have recommended, Brown acted as quickly as possible, but not quicker. Just three months after occupying the eighth-floor corner office that looks across the Charles River at the institute where he worked for 25 years, he asked the heads of all departments to create a 15-page document describing the state of their department and where they wanted to go. And when those reports arrived, he told his deans to boil them down to a single 15-page document for each school. The goal, a new one for BU, was to create a democrati-
TO THE COMPLEXITY OF THE ACADEMIC ORGANIZATION,” SAYS BROWN.

Brown meets with parents at a post-Matriculation reception. From his eighth-floor office, the president can look across the Charles River to his former home at MIT.

cally crafted roadmap to the future: a strategic plan.

Julie Sandell, Faculty Council chair from 2006 to 2008, says Brown’s first major move accomplished two important things. It yielded the outlines of a useful strategic plan, and “it showed that this was going to be a new era of cooperative efforts.”

“Dr. Brown realized very quickly that a plan that grows from the bottom up serves a number of purposes,” says Sandell, a School of Medicine professor of anatomy and neurobiology and associate provost for faculty development. “It would engage the faculty in thinking in a forward-looking way about how to take BU to the next step. It was a novel idea, that the faculty would have a collective responsibility in determining the direction of the institution. It was more of a partnership than many faculty had experienced.”

In December 2006, 15 months after Brown came to BU, his strategic planning task force delivered a 33-page framework for the plan. It was posted on the BU website for all to read and for anyone in the University community to comment on. Brown asked for feedback, and he got lots of it, including several concerns about the speed at which he was pushing ahead.

“I knew it was going to be hard,” he says. “But I also knew that if you don’t start moving forward, you spend so much time wringing your hands over the past. You have to tweak or manage the process as it goes. You had to fix it as it moved.”

In September 2007, Brown unveiled Forging Our Future by Choosing To Be Great (bu.edu/strategicreport). The plan was unabashedly ambitious. It outlined ways to make it easier for students enrolled in one college to study in another; it called for improvements to dorms and classrooms and for the recruitment of 100 new faculty for the College of Arts & Sciences. Several of the professional schools were targeted for growth. The School of Management was slated to hire 20 new faculty, the School of Law would begin a capital campaign for an expanded and fully renovated facility, with a dollar-for-dollar match in

THE BROWN BIO: SHORT FORM

Before he was appointed president of Boston University in September 2005, Robert A. Brown was provost and Warren K. Lewis Professor of Chemical Engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He joined the MIT faculty in 1979. In 25 years at MIT, he was head of the department of chemical engineering and dean of the School of Engineering. He became provost in 1998. He served as executive editor of the *Journal of Chemical Engineering Science* from 1991 to 2004 and has published more than 250 papers in areas related to mathematical modeling of transport phenomena in materials. He is a member of the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

A Texan by birth, Brown earned a BS and an MS in chemical engineering at the University of Texas at Austin. He received a PhD in chemical engineering at the University of Minnesota.

He has been a director of the DuPont Company since April 2007 and most recently, he was appointed a trustee of the Universities Research Association. From 2006 through 2008 he served on the President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, a panel established to provide a steady stream of expert advice on a wide range of scientific and technical matters. He is chair of the Academic Research Council of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Singapore, and he is on the board of Singapore’s National Research Foundation.

Brown lives in Brookline, Mass., with his wife, Beverly Brown, director of development—an unpaid position—for BU’s Center for Global Health & Development. They have two grown sons. AJ
funding from the University, and the College of Fine Arts would expand and renovate. The plan also established that undergraduate student financial aid would keep Boston University accessible to qualified students regardless of their economic status, and it cited as a priority an effort to make faculty salaries and benefits competitive to attract the best teachers, scholars, and researchers. It included new opportunities for alumni, such as mentoring programs to connect students to the professional world and a revamped career counseling system to provide broader resources for BU graduates.

The price tag was as impressive as the plan: $1.8 billion over 10 years, with annual commitments growing to $225 million per year. But during the many months that the faculty had been honing the plan, Brown and BU’s executive leadership had been exploring ways to pay for it.

“Bob was an instant expert in financial matters,” says Joseph Mercurio, the University’s executive vice president. “In a very short time he had a thorough understanding of our financial operating model.”

Most of the funding of the plan—60 percent, it was decided—would come from operations and from debt financing. Mercurio says Brown’s modifications to finances, which include a greater reliance on data-driven financial analytics, have allowed the University to double—to $100 million a year—the money transferred to academic programs, student services, and building.

“Some of the money we were able to transfer came from the elimination of units that were not core to the University, like the Tyngsboro campus,” says Mercurio, “and some of it came from fine-tuning things.”

Savings from those efforts, Mercurio says, will pay for projects such as a new $52 million business management system, making wireless internet access available across campus, creating a new $65 million student services center on East Campus, and a renovation of the School of Law tower. Alumni giving also is playing important new roles, such as in the development of the $38 million residence for students at the School of Medicine.

Mercurio says the majority of the University’s forward motion has been guided by one of two notions introduced by Brown. One is the strategic plan; the other is the virtuous circle concept, often applied to business: a closed system of events in which each benefits the next. In the practical case of BU, says Mercurio, it means if the University does well, it reinvests in itself, which leads to its doing better, and reinvesting more.

At the beginning of the 2008 fall semester, three years into the new era of Bob Brown, BU had completed the two best fiscal operating years in its history. University leadership seemed comfortable with the new president, who, to the relief of many, had made no substantial personnel changes.

In September, the trustees expressed the hope that Brown would stay on for another five years. He said yes. Dropping the puck at the Terrier hockey home opener, in 2005. Pride in his role as BU’s leader, Brown says, “is really earned.”

WEB EXTRA Through March, Bob Brown will take your questions about changes at the University.

Trouble ahead

By mid-September 2008, the University leadership was confronted with something that hadn’t been factored
President Robert A. Brown’s commitment to boundary-pushing, interdisciplinary research and academic excellence comes to life in these three, among several, initiatives.

CENTER FOR NEUROSCIENCE
In fall 2007, Brown established the Center for Neuroscience, a University-wide initiative to advance cutting-edge interdisciplinary, collaborative research and education on the neural basis of behavior and cognition. Under the directorship of Howard Eichenbaum, a College of Arts & Sciences professor of psychology and a University Professor, the center explores experimental and theoretical computational approaches that span molecular, cellular, systems, behavioral, and cognitive levels of analysis. The goal of the research is to expand the understanding of fundamental mechanisms of brain function and translate advances into practical applications, including treatment of neurologic and psychiatric disorders and development of new directions in educational practice.

CENTER FOR GLOBAL HEALTH & DEVELOPMENT
In September 2009, Brown committed $10 million in funding to the Center for Global Health & Development, a School of Public Health-based multidisciplinary applied research center that hopes to solve the critical global health and social development challenges of our time. The mission of the center is to conduct high-quality policy- and program-relevant applied research and to advocate for the use of the research evidence to improve the health of low-income or marginalized populations around the world.

UNIVERSITY HONORS COLLEGE
In spring 2008, BU established a University-wide undergraduate program, called the University Honors College, which offers cross-disciplinary classes, intensive seminars, and independent study for seniors. It supersedes the University Professors Program, being phased out when the last class graduates in 2011. The Honors College curriculum encompasses all four years of an undergraduate program and features two semester-long freshman seminars, two semester-long sophomore discussion classes, a one-semester junior year course, and a keystone research project during senior year. Students will also complete an internship during the summer of sophomore year. Freshman courses focus on research, creation, and discovery involving fine arts, philosophy, management, history, literature, and engineering. Sophomore courses look at practices of inquiry across the arts, sciences, and professions. Juniors develop a detailed proposal for their keystone project, to be carried out senior year. AJ

HE WANTED, BUT HE DIDN’T DO THAT,” SAYS DAVID D’ALESSANDRO.

Brown, along with Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick, attends the Chelsea High School Honor Society induction in 2007. Boston University managed the Chelsea public schools for 20 years.

Boston Celtics star Larry Bird received an honorary Doctor of Letters in 2009.
“EVERYONE SAYS, ‘IF I HAD X, I COULD DO BETTER.’ AND THEY’RE RIGHT.”

Hugo Shong (COM’87, GRS’92) and Brown exchange signed copies of the Boston University Alumni Association of China’s $1 million pledge.

Brown throws out the first pitch at a Red Sox game at Fenway Park in 2010.

dearly, but unequally. Ironically, the schools with the greatest endowments (and therefore the greatest dependence on endowments) were hardest hit. Harvard, for example, whose endowment (reduced from nearly $37 billion to $26 billion) supported a third of its operating budget, was forced to eliminate almost 300 jobs, freeze salaries, and put on hold plans to expand its campus in Allston. At BU, where the far more meager endowment (down from $1.2 billion to $916 million) provided less than 4 percent of the operating budget, Brown navigated the downturn deftly, with minimal pain and with a mathematician’s precision. He avoided across-the-board salary cuts, froze salaries of $150,000 or more, and capped salary increases for those earning less than $150,000 at 2 to 3 percent. Following the advice of seven task forces that had been charged with cutting $10 million from the $1.9 billion budget, the University pulled 125 job postings. It also closed the Sargent Center for Outdoor Education in New Hampshire, as well as University Computers.

“When you look at Bob’s tenure,” says Knox, “you see truly astute financial management. I think BU is the only major university that has received a ratings upgrade in that time by both major rating agencies, Moody’s and Standard & Poor’s.”

That astute financial management comes to Brown painstakingly, and as he says, painfully. “The most depressed I get annually is the time of year I see the budget proposals,” he says. “Everybody comes in and says, ‘If I had this incremental amount of resource, I could do X, and I could be better.’ And they’re all right. The question is how to prioritize things.”

One of Brown’s most visible—and prospective students—priorities has been a limit on tuition increases. In the last two years, he has kept the rise to 3.73 percent, the lowest increase in three decades, and a likely influence on the increasing number of applicants for slots in the freshman class. During his tenure, applications for undergraduate admission have jumped 30 percent, from 31,851 to 41,509, an all-time record.

That matters, says Brown, because tuition and fees account for about 46.6 percent of the University’s total revenue, while auxiliary services such as dining and housing bring in about 16.1 percent. Sponsored research contributes about 23.9 percent.

NEW PEOPLE, NEW IDEAS

“I’m a great fan of private higher education,” Brown says. “I love the self-containment of it. I love the idea of working between the leadership of the University and the faculty and the board. There’s no governor, there’s no legislature, there’s nobody else. If you can figure out a financial model that can get you where you want to go within those constituencies, you go.”

In fact, Brown has done more than figure out a financial model within those constituencies; he’s reconstituted the most influential of them, the Board of Trustees, working closely with longtime members, such as Knox, D’Alessandro, and Alan Leventhal (Hon.’09), another former board chair, to identify and recruit new trustees.

“Today more than half of the 41 members are new to the board,” says Brown. “We have a lot of people who have had past associations with the school and some who were not involved at all. Commercial real estate developer Steve Karp, one of the most successful businessmen in New England, is now the chair of the budget and finance committee. I can say I have the privilege of being a president with one of the best boards in the country, because they put the time and energy into it and they are aligned in trying to making the University better.”

Brown has put similar energy and discernment into his search for deans, appointing 14 of 19 deans, and bringing in such highly regarded leaders as Kenneth Freeman to the School of Management and Benjamin Juarez to the College of Fine Arts. Last fall, he recruited Jean Morrison as provost, luring her away from the University of Southern California, where she had been executive vice provost for academic affairs and graduate programs, as well as director of the USC Women in Science and Engineering program (see page 14).
“Hiring Jean Morrison says a lot about where the University has come under Bob's leadership,” says Knox. “I don’t think there’s a chance in the world that someone of her caliber would come here if she were not fully convinced that we have an amazing organization, and an ability to become an even greater organization in a reasonable period of time.”

Working with deans and the Faculty Council, Brown has also made progress narrowing the historic gap between the salaries of men and women. Faculty Council chair Adam Sweeting, a College of General Studies associate professor of humanities, says Brown’s willingness to share all data on salary ranks and gender has helped to reform the relationship between the faculty and administration.

“There is a transparency and a sharing of information that is greatly appreciated,” says Sweeting, lauding Brown’s launch of joint initiatives between the Charles River and Medical Campuses, such as the Center for Global Health & Development, the Center for Neuroscience, and the University Honors College (see sidebar, page 31). “He thinks very strategically about academic programs and how to make the University an even better private research university.”

Brown also recognized a few governance holes that had never been filled. And so, for the first time in BU’s history, the University hired a vice president for research, a chief investment officer, and a chief information officer.

D’Alessandro, a longtime observer of BU, former chair, CEO, and president of John Hancock Financial Services, and the author of three books on executive leadership, says Brown’s achievements in his first five years cover the waterfront: he’s worked in impressively collaborative ways with the faculty, he’s diversified the Board of Trustees, he’s expanded the University’s footprint both physically and academically, and he’s made BU a more desirable destination for incoming freshmen. Most notably, he says, in economically uncertain times, Brown has set the University on a sound financial course.

Brown is more modest. He insists that the DNA needed for much of the progress made was here long before his arrival. “My sense of BU, and that hasn’t changed at all since I arrived, is that the faculty have always had a great desire to have the institution be more recognized than it is,” he says. “They have always wanted to be recognized for the quality of this institution and the quality of what we do. My bringing that alignment together was really trivial.”

In the wood-paneled office where Brown will map out BU’s journey for the next five years, a stuffed toy cat sprawls on a windowsill, facing out across the Charles River. The cat, he says, was a gift from a colleague who heard Brown remark shortly after his arrival on the dead cats everywhere that no one wanted to bury. Today, with this one floppy exception, the dead cats are buried.

WEB EXTRA
Read about six large gifts accounting for more than $60 million at bu.edu/bostonia.

REENGAGING THE ALUMNI COMMUNITY

President Robert A. Brown’s 10-year, $1.8 billion strategic plan will be financed largely from operations and debt financing, but much of the support for professorships, scholarships, and funding for schools and colleges will require a new level of commitment from alumni and friends. Toward that end, Brown has engineered a revitalization of Development & Alumni Relations (DAR) and of the University’s commitment to an alumni community of nearly 300,000.

In 2006, he brought in Scott Nichols, former dean for development, alumni relations, and communications at Harvard Law School, as DAR vice president. The next year, Nichols recruited Steven Hall, from the University of Houston, as associate vice president for alumni relations.

Armed with a recent survey of alumni—with 90,000 responses—Hall and his team worked closely with the leadership of the BU Alumni Association to build an engagement program to meet the needs of BU and its alumni.

“It became clear that BU alumni wanted two things: connection and content,” says Hall. “They want to connect to the University and one another through affinities that are important to them, and the content of those connections has to add value to their own lives.”

The BU Alumni Association also replaced class-based reunions with an inclusive Alumni Weekend, which invites all alumni back to campus, rather than specific graduating classes. The change is paying off: while the old model brought back an average of 600 to 700 alumni each year, last fall’s event attracted more than 4,000.

“We also took a look at BU’s institutional history and realized our students, alumni, and faculty have always been committed to service, says Hall. “We knew we could leverage that commitment for engagement.”

Last year, the BU Alumni Association launched the annual Global Day of Service, during which alumni around the world served lunch to the homeless, helped build a home for the needy, cleared trails in state parks, volunteered at local food banks, and even organized a carnival for underprivileged children, in New Delhi. The event drew 3,700 participants, who performed 15,000 hours of service at 60 sites around the world. The second annual Global Day of Service will take place on Saturday, April 16, 2011.

In one of the most successful, and emotional, events in recent memory, BU invited the Class of 1970 back for the Commencement they never had. Concerns for safety during a period of national unrest persuaded officials to cancel graduation 41 years ago. The gathering last May drew 220 alumni and their families and was covered by the Boston Globe and the New York Times.

At the same time, DAR is employing the power of social media. The BU Alumni Association’s Facebook fan page (facebook.com/bualumni), launched in 2009, has more than 31,000 fans, the second highest of any alumni association in the country, and its Twitter feed (twitter.com/bualumni) has more than 6,100 followers.

The bottom line: in the fiscal year ending 2010, more than 37,000 BU alumni and their guests attended more than 700 alumni events. Just two years earlier, only 20,000 showed up at some 200 events. AJ