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West Chester University president R. Lorraine "Laurie" Bernotsky accepts the university medallion and mace during Friday's inauguration. Jessica Griffin / Staff Photographer

West Chester president aiming for 'awesome'

R. Lorraine "Laurie"

Bernotsky is inaugurated during a tumultuous time in higher education.

By Susan Snyder
 Staff Writer

West Chester University president R. Lorraine "Laurie" Bernotsky at her inauguration Friday confronted head-on the tumultuous times in higher education that she has walked into as the new leader of Pennsylvania's largest state-run

university.

"This job now involves dealing with so much uncertainty," Bernotsky said, speaking to hundreds of faculty, students, and other dignitaries at the college's concert hall. "In this moment of intense polarization, it seems that the focus is more on winning battles than on the consequences of those battles."

"Sadly, our universities sit right in the center of this battlefield."

Since taking office in January, President Donald Trump has issued orders to slash research funding, dismantle the U.S. Department of Education, end diversity programs, and crack down on pro-Palestinian

student protesters. He has begun pausing funding to universities that have run afoul of his policy direction, including \$175 million to the University of Pennsylvania for allowing a transgender swimmer to compete on the women's team in 2021-22.

West Chester's new leader didn't mention Trump by name or his specific actions in her speech Friday, though she referenced polarization. She also noted a slide in public confidence in higher education and a coming enrollment cliff due to smaller numbers of high school graduates.

"People are worried. People are

nervous, and people are anxious," Bernotsky, 57, said, describing what she heard from faculty and staff in her first nearly nine months as West Chester's leader.

But on Friday, the mood was decidedly uplifting and confidence abounded as Bernotsky, a political scientist who has worked at West Chester for more than a quarter century as a professor, provost, and president since July 1, said she doesn't intend to stand still amid the controversy.

She will aim to move the university forward and turn it from "almost awesome" to "awesome,"

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both in big ways and smaller ones, she said.

Bernotsky pledged to address the need for more student housing, chip away at deferred maintenance in campus buildings and replace the “clunky, outdated” stadium scoreboard, which Florida donors Roger and Agnes Ware, whom she recently visited, have agreed to fund.

“Those little things can make a big difference in where we are as a university,” she said.

She also said she will look for ways to add more experiential learning experiences for students including study abroad, support faculty whose research is nationally recognized, and take West Chester from a regionally recognized university to a nationally recognized one.

“Truly awesome is people

knowing that West Chester is two words outside of Philly, not one word outside of New York,” she said, referring to the county of Westchester north of New York City. “Truly awesome is being thought of as an awesome school on a national level,” Bernotsky said.

She acknowledged those who helped her reach her potential, including one of her college professors who questioned her desire to become a lawyer and suggested she become a college professor, and those who inspired her, including her sister who courageously battled cancer until she died at 38.

Born in Philadelphia and raised in the Lancaster area, Bernotsky got her bachelor’s degree from then-Messiah College (now a university) in political science, a master’s and doctorate from Oxford University, and another master’s from Temple University.

Bernotsky, who earns \$456,000 annually, has spent almost her entire career at West Chester. She served as acting president of Pennsylvania Western University, another state university, for a stint before returning to West Chester as president. She replaced

Christopher Fiorentino, who is now serving as interim chancellor of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, of which West Chester is a part.

Bernotsky recalled her time as a camp counselor, including an instance when she was treading water in a lake, fearing she didn’t have the strength to get to shore. Then someone told her to flip over and move by doing the backstroke, and she made it.

“Our university is not going to just tread water,” she said, stirring applause. “We are not going to just stay in place. We are not just going to get by. Instead, together, we will find the courage to keep moving forward, to keep moving to a better place, a place where our best work is yet to come.”

“She’s going to make it happen,” said Stephanie Reid, assistant dean of the college of arts and humanities, shortly after Bernotsky was handed the ceremonial university medallion and mace.

Mary Pat Werley, assistant vice president of academic budgets, said Bernotsky isn’t just a great and smart leader, but a good person set for generational

leadership going forward,” she said.

Student leaders, who participated in the ceremony, also praised Bernotsky.

“Before you leave her office, she will always ask what she can do for you,” McKenna Nugent, president of West Chester’s student government association, told the crowd.

Also addressing the audience was Bernotsky’s longtime mentor Madeleine Wing Adler, the first female president of West Chester and also a political scientist, who led the institution for 16 years until 2008. Bernotsky and Adler were roommates on a university trip to South Africa in 2001 when Bernotsky, then a professor, was inspired by Adler to become a leader.

“It wasn’t difficult to identify a rising star back in 2001,” Adler told the crowd, “and here we are almost a quarter of a century later, celebrating that scholar.”

Bernotsky said West Chester will remain grounded as a place “where ideas can be explored freely, where questions can be asked openly, and where teaching and scholarship are guided by curiosity, evidence and care.”

She acknowledged the

challenges ahead and the courage needed to navigate them.

She told the story of how Heather Schugar, a faculty member who helps to lead West Chester’s education doctoral program, recently talked at a meeting about some of her students considering dropping out because of the federal executive orders targeting the education field. Some of them were nearly done with their dissertations.

Schugar spent a weekend reading articles on how sports coaches motivate their players, Bernotsky said.

“She took the time to learn how to get goalies out of a rut, and then she used those motivational techniques to ... motivate her students to finish their doctoral work,” Bernotsky said.

“She found a way to move forward. That’s showing courage in the face of uncertainty ... That’s unleashing the potential of others in the face of uncertainty. And that’s who we are, and that’s what we do, and that’s how we will move forward through all this uncertainty and get ourselves to a better place.”

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