

# Two Louisiana Universities Have Longest-serving Presidents

**P**assion for his work and keeping focused on priorities are two keys to Dr. Ray Authement's success and longevity as president of UL Lafayette.

That's the assessment of Dr. Norman Francis, president of Xavier University in New Orleans.

Francis is the longest-serving president of a private university in the United States. He has been Xavier's president for 40 years.

Authement is the longest-serving president of a public university in the nation. In late April, Authement announced he will retire after 33 years as UL Lafayette's top leader.

According to a survey conducted by the American Council on Education, the average tenure for a university president in 2006 was 8.5 years. That's up from an average of 6.6 years in 2001.

Francis and Authement are friends, as well as colleagues, who enjoy mutual respect.

Francis will deliver the keynote address at UL Lafayette's Commencement in December, when Authement will be honored. He will also receive an honorary doctorate in educational leadership from UL Lafayette during that ceremony.

"Dr. Authement is passionate about his commitment to educating young people in Louisiana and, particularly, in Acadiana and Lafayette. He gives his total talents, every day," Francis said. "He gives that willingly. That commitment inspires others at the university to work as hard as he does.

"The key is that he has kept his attention and his focus on the core elements – students first and faculty, or what we call the first among equals, meaning that it's both students and faculty.

"He never forgot that the institution was founded to serve students and he always had with him really committed faculty and staff to serve that core mission.

"That is the secret, not only to longevity but the secret to making sure the university has the quality to serve students. And he's done it well. Lafayette, the region and Louisiana have been lucky to have had him for all these years."



Dr. Norman Francis

Francis grew up in Lafayette, down the street from UL Lafayette, which was known then as Southwestern Louisiana Institute. SLI – like every other public university in the Deep South – prohibited black students from attending then.

During UL Lafayette's Commencement in December 2004, Authement spoke about that period of history. He recalled a conversation with Francis a few years ago.

"He told me over dinner one day, 'Ray, it was very, very hard to ride my bicycle through that campus when I was a teenager and to know that I could not enroll because of the color of my skin. I was denied an opportunity to attend my home university just a few blocks from my father's barbershop and our family home.'"

Authement enrolled at SLI in 1947. In 1954, four years after Authement graduated with a bachelor's degree in physics, SLI became one of the first all-white public universities in the South to integrate.

By then, Francis had earned a bachelor's degree from Xavier University, the only historically black Catholic University in the nation, and was about to become the first black graduate of Loyola University New Orleans College of Law.

At age 36, Francis became the first

lay president of Xavier University – and its first male president – in April 1968.

Xavier now has about 2,500 students in its College of the Arts, 590 in its College of Pharmacy and 200 in its Graduate School.

According to the *Chronicle for Higher Education*, Xavier "sends more minority students to medical schools and graduates more minority pharmacists than any other university in the country." It has also produced one of every four black pharmacists in the United States since 1957.

Authement was named president of UL Lafayette, then called the University of Southwestern Louisiana, in 1974, after serving a year as its interim president. Today, UL Lafayette is the second largest university in the state, with more than 16,000 students.

By the mid-1980s, USL had about \$500,000 to invest. Now, it has more than \$150 million in gifted and pledged assets.

One of Francis' biggest trials as president occurred when Hurricane Katrina slammed into south Louisiana in 2005. A breach in the protective levees around New Orleans inundated the Xavier campus with seven feet of water that sat for three weeks.

In the storm's wake, Francis had to lay off more than a third of the school's staff and faculty and deal with more than \$35 million in damage to its campus. He also lost everything in his family home.

Nonetheless, Francis agreed to serve as chairman of the Louisiana Recovery Authority, a reconstruction advisory board, when asked by Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco.

Norman and Authement were honored earlier this year during the 69th annual Conference of Louisiana Colleges and Universities.

In December 2006, Francis was awarded the Medal of Freedom by President George W. Bush. He has been an adviser to several U.S. presidents.

President Ronald Reagan appointed Francis to a national commission that released "A Nation at Risk" in 1983. It was a landmark call for education reform. ■