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True believer

Ryan McPherson '02 guides UB Believers community outreach effort

What is good for the University is good for Western New York. That is the core message of UB Believers, an ambitious effort to build a constituency of supporters that reaches far beyond the campus limits. Through the University's Division of External Affairs, the campaign has won the loyalties of more than 4,000 individuals – and counting.

"People will advocate for pre-K through 12 education, because they have kids," says Ryan McPherson '02, who coordinates the program. "They are attuned to issues around health care and the economy. But higher education seldom, makes it into that mix. People who see higher education as a critical investment in our future tend not to be as well organized as other groups."

UB Believers aims to change that, reaching out to the Western New York community with a message that emphasizes the University's incredible economic benefits for its region. When residents come to understand UB's current and future potential for revitalizing the area's economy, McPherson says, they will become advocates for the University and will make that support known to the community and their elected officials.

It is an easy argument to make, says McPherson, who serves as chief of staff for Marsha Henderson, vice president for external affairs. UB's economic impact for 2005-06 was estimated at \$1.5 billion; with full realization of the UB 2020 plan, which would increase the student body by 10,000 students, the impact is projected to be \$2.6 billion annually, in 2006 dollars. And that figure includes everything from direct spending by the University's students, faculty and staff, to construction spending, to the third of a billion dollars in annual research expenditures the University leverages. The number, however, does not take into account the thousands of jobs created by the commercialization of UB-developed technology.

No other economic engine, McPherson says, has anywhere near the University's potential to grow the region's financial health



and overall quality of life. "In my heart of hearts," he says, "I think the best strategy in moving Western New York forward is to support the University and its research base. This is the best investment people can make if they want to see Buffalo Niagara transition our economy and reach our potential."

Those who sign on as UB Believers (www.buffalo.edu/YourUB) receive a bi-weekly e-mail with key news from the University and opportunities to advocate for UB as it moves toward its goal of becoming a preeminent public research university.

The goal is to have a ready core of supporters to lobby state lawmakers on legislation important to the University. That includes funding allocations, of course, but extends to policy decisions that affect UB as well. For example, McPherson says, the Legislature's decision to allow differential tuition for UB Law School, rather than follow in lockstep with general State University of New York tuition rates, has enabled major improvements to O'Brian Hall and has allowed the Law School to increase its student diversity with targeted financial aid.

If you live in Western New York, you have seen solicitations for UB Believers. The pitch is being made everywhere from billboards to direct mail to a major Internet

presence, including Facebook and MySpace pages. There are even videos in support of the cause; "we are trying to tell rational stories in emotional ways that increase resonance with our message and demonstrate the massive impact UB has," McPherson says.

The cause is a personal one for McPherson, a New Hampshire native who worked on developing and formulating public policy and then advocating those positions in New Hampshire and Washington, D.C., before coming to UB Law. During Law School he worked in UB's Office of Government Relations, then became assistant vice president for government and community relations.

What good was his legal education? McPherson says he gets that question a lot. But, he says, "I use the three years I was there, and the training, every single day. I use the skills in terms of judgment, looking at a problem, analyzing it, weighing different options and building coalitions. As a lawyer, you are trained to look at both sides of an issue. They teach you to ask the right questions and push where you need to push."

One other thing, he says: With such experiences as the seven-hour exam in Nils Olsen's civil procedure course, and studying for the Bar exam, Law School teaches something about stamina.

McPherson needs that for the triathlons he competes in, and for keeping up with a busy young family; he and his wife, Alexandra (who runs an environmental organization dedicated to designing cleaner products and manufacturing processes), have a 4-year-old daughter, Jasmine, and a 2-year-old son, Sayward.

But it also comes in handy in weeks like the one that led to New York Gov. Eliot Spitzer declaring, in his State of the State message, that "UB will become an economic engine for Buffalo, and a flagship institution for a world-class public university system." "That was a great moment," McPherson says, "to see the governor buy into the vision of UB 2020. It was something our university has been working on for a long time."