Nova University had finally extricated itself from what had become a restricting and controversial arrangement with the New York Institute of Technology (NYIT). Nova now had the freedom to chart its own course, but first had to put its financial affairs in order. The money from the Goodwin Unitrust had saved the day in the immediate term and allowed Nova to pay off some of its debt and open the law school, but money issues would continue to plague the university. In 1986, Nova’s budget was in the black for the first time in its history, and the university moved confidently and enthusiastically into its first year unfettered by outside controls. The years from 1986 to 1998 would usher in a more stable era of growth and would set the stage for a period of extended success. The university was under the aegis of three presidents in those years: Abe Fischler, who left office in 1992, Stephen Feldman (1992–1994), and Ovid Lewis (1994–1997).

President Fischler recalled that the period from 1985 to 1992 demonstrated that Nova did not need a partner. The school could go it alone, and “the future was in our hands.” To completely free itself from NYIT, Nova began paying off its debt and by 1992 had liquidated the debt. From 1986 on, Nova earned enough surplus money to expand its departments and develop new programs.

Fischler remained busy trying to keep the budget in the black and keep Nova moving forward. A typical day in the late 1980s included several daily meetings with his personal staff and weekly consultations with the administrative council. Because Fischler had performed almost all of the administration of the university by himself for many
years, he needed additional executive support to run an independent and rapidly developing institution. Thus he increased the upper levels of his administration. Fischler explained that under his leadership the university was not organized in the traditional university style; rather, “it was organized as a business.” The directors of the various centers reported directly to Fischler, but he saw his organization as more of a communications vehicle than a way of controlling how the directors ran their centers. Fischler did not want the faculty senate to have input on university decisions because he believed that “the academic senate is built on distrust and not on trust.” In a business model, he thought, one should not allow the employees to make judgments on important matters. A benevolent dictatorship functioned more efficiently.

The president spent about 50 percent of his time in the community. “Part of that was friend making, part of that was giving visibility to the university, and part of that was trying to raise additional funds.” Because Fischler thought the university president should be active in county affairs, he was on the board of directors of the chamber of commerce, the art museum, the Hollywood Medical Center, the Mailman Family Foundation, and the United Way. He wanted to make strong connections to the community and entice important people from downtown Fort Lauderdale to come out to see what Nova was doing.1

To increase public interest in Nova and to provide citizens with insight into world affairs, Stephen Goldstein, vice president for public affairs, set up the “Distinguished Speakers” series. The variety and excellence of speakers appearing in Fort Lauderdale would rival any university’s speaker series in the nation. Beginning in 1980–1981 with news commentators Irving R. Levine and Douglas Edwards, the parade of celebrities and newsmakers from 1981 through 1988 astonished the local media. Noted politicians included former presidents Jimmy Carter and Gerald R. Ford; former secretaries of state Henry Kissinger and Alexander Haig; former secretary of defense James R. Schlesinger; Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security advisor to Jimmy Carter; Tip O’Neill, speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives; and Ramsey Clark, former U.S. attorney general. Also on the list were well-known writers such as playwright Edward Albee; authors James Baldwin, Kurt Vonnegut, Ellen Goodman, and Isaac Bashevis Singer. From television news came David Brinkley, Eric Sevareid, John Chancellor, Alistair Cooke of *Masterpiece Theater*, Diane Sawyer, and Charles Kuralt. Foreign visitors also graced the podium: Edward Heath and Harold Wilson, former prime ministers of the United King-
dom; Helmut Schmidt, former chancellor of West Germany; and Kurt Waldheim, former secretary general of the United Nations. Political commentators included William F. Buckley Jr. and George Will.

Covering more mundane matters were Miss Manners (Judith Martin) and gossip columnist Ann Landers. Controversial speakers included G. Gordon Liddy and Benjamin Spock. Other invitees were General William Westmoreland, actress Joan Fontaine, and opera singer Beverly Sills. This list does not come close to covering all the distinguished visitors who appeared in Fort Lauderdale, but it gives one some idea of the broad coverage and significance of the speaker’s series. Nova was no longer intellectually isolated and had been able to convince some of the most powerful personalities in the world to come to a relatively unknown university. Nova had an additional cultural impact on the community by sponsoring art shows, musical programs, a performance by the Fort Lauderdale Opera Company, and creative arts workshops.

In mid-June 1988, rumors persisted that the Florida state university system wanted to take over Nova. Those rumors proved reliable when the state legislature passed a bill that directed the Board of Regents, the administrative body for the state university system, to “investigate the feasibility of incorporating Nova University into the state university system” as the tenth state university. One legislator argued that Nova’s law school and undergraduate programs were attractive and successful, and since Nova was already getting state funding for its liberal arts program, it made sense to purchase the university and incorporate Nova into the state system. Initially the idea would be for Nova to remain a separate institution, retain its autonomy and its property, and continue to offer innovative courses, but still be a semiautonomous part of the state system. Nova officials were less than enthusiastic about the idea. Abe Fischler had no comment, August Paoli felt “strongly” that Nova should remain private, and Tom Panza, a Nova attorney, declared, “Nova is not for sale.”

Backers of the proposal asserted that Broward County had been underserved by the state in higher education and that local citizens deserved the presence of a state university. A positive factor for the state was that it would cost the Board of Regents virtually nothing to convert the already existing private school into a public university. The Nova Board of Trustees rejected the state’s offer and expressed no interest in giving up the school’s independent status. President Fischler commented that the school might lose its creative edge if taken over by the state: “I see nothing for Nova to gain if we were to become
part of the state’s system.” Shortly thereafter, the State Board of Regents recommended that Nova remain private and independent. Some legislators thought the decision was a disservice to Broward residents, whereas trustee Ray Ferrero Jr. wanted to maintain a middle ground where Nova would be independent but still receive state money.  

In 1989, Nova University celebrated its “Quarter-Century Anniversary,” the twenty-five years since its founding in 1964. President Fischler’s report to the university and the community recorded the school’s progress since 1964 and documented the impact that Nova had in each of its critical areas: teaching, research, community service, cultural affairs, and finances. Fischler commented that Nova was the second largest independent university in Florida, had awarded more than 20,000 graduate and undergraduate degrees, and offered degree programs in twenty-two states. He stressed Nova’s innovative qualities and its ability to make education accessible to many students without compromising standards. In an attempt to promote Nova and boost morale, Fischler made clear that the financial impact Nova University had on Broward County was considerable. By 1989 it had become one of the largest employers in the county, with 886 faculty and staff and a payroll of $25.4 million. In twenty-three years, Nova had spent more than $332 million for goods and services, salaries, and construction. In 1986–1987, the university’s revenues exceeded $46 million, the second year that the school posted a surplus.

Fischler touted Nova’s advances in research in addictive and eating disorders, family violence, and neurological syndromes. The Oceanographic Center had made major discoveries in the assessment of coral reefs and coastal dynamics. The president expressed pride in Nova’s community services, particularly the publicly funded not-for-profit mental health facility in the school of psychology.

In the future, Fischler expected Nova to capitalize on breakthroughs in teaching and learning through advances in technology while continuing its innovative curriculum. The university constantly stressed that “the student is the class” and that no student was lost in the crowd. Later on, this theme was developed with a thoughtful tag line for Nova publications: “Nova: Your Future, Your Terms.”

**Law School**

An important development for the university’s future arose when Nova decided to move the law school from the Southwest Ninth
Avenue building to the main campus. The law school had been growing at a rapid pace since 1974, and in 1988 boasted some 770 students from twenty-two states and four foreign countries. Roger Abrams, the new dean of the law school, arrived in 1986 after earning his law degree at Harvard University and working for twelve years as a law professor at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. In 1988, the law school achieved an important academic distinction by being accepted into the prestigious Association of American Law Schools. Dean Abrams commented that the association accepted only the best schools and that this recognition was an important event for Nova. “It shows the world that we have arrived.” What was really surprising about this honor, continued Abrams, “is that it is rare to be admitted the first time after applying.”

Nova law school had made progress in several areas since 1974. The school designed a new program called the Summer Conditional Program. The idea was to assist law students who did not score well on the Law School Admission Test (LSAT). The marginal students who did not score high enough on the LSAT but showed promise of being a high achiever were given the option of taking two law courses in the summer. If they scored a C-plus or better in the two courses, then they were admitted unconditionally to the law school. Ray Ferrero Jr., a member of the law school’s board of governors, concluded that the law school made great progress from 1974 to 1989 and the school’s reputation had improved.

Nonetheless, the school still had a problem with its graduates passing the Florida bar exam. By 1989, the percentage increased to 79 percent, but Florida State, the University of Florida, and Stetson law schools had passing rates of about 87 to 88 percent. Nova, not pleased with its results, recommended better student preparation and looked at other ways to improve the scores. Ron Chenail did a study on Nova law students in early 2000 to explain why they were not doing well on the bar. The study discovered that the one variable that predicted success on the bar exam was the student’s grade point average (GPA) in law school. When a student’s GPA dropped below a 2.5, the likelihood of passing the exam was not very good. The law school began to help the weaker students with their study skills, and the passage rate increased.

In 1988, the school benefitted from a generous gift of $3 million from Shepard Broad. A legal and business pioneer in South Florida, Broad had given much of his time and resources to many charities and played a large role in the development of the area. An orphaned
Russian immigrant, Broad came to America in 1920. He graduated from New York Law School and moved to Miami in 1940. A founding partner in the Miami law firm of Broad and Cassel, he was a member of the board of governors of the Nova law school, a close friend of Ray Ferrero Jr., and had been a strong proponent of establishing the law school.

President Fischler called the $3 million gift especially welcome during the university’s twenty-fifth anniversary: “It enables us to bring the law school back on campus, and that’s important because of the synergy between the law school and the rest of the facilities on campus.” The law school, no longer isolated on the east campus, would now be an integral part of the university and law faculty could interact more easily with the other centers. Since at this time there were only seven or eight buildings and several modular units on the main campus, the construction of the new law building marked a major step toward developing a sound infrastructure on the central campus. The planned three-story law center complex would include a library, academic and administrative wings, classrooms, and an extensive computer research center.

Dean Abrams commented that Broad’s gift was “another important step in the growing recognition of the law center as a law school of the first rank.” Fischler announced that the Nova Center for the Study of Law would be renamed the Shepard Broad Law Center of Nova University and would be housed in the newly constructed Leo Goodwin Sr. Law Building. The Goodwin building was completed and opened for use in 1992. ¹⁰

Naming the law building created something of a conundrum for university officials. The Goodwin Unitrust had given $5 million to the law school, so the law school named the new, yet to be completed building the Leo Goodwin Sr. Law Building. To accommodate Shepard Broad’s gift, the university decided to rename the law school for him. Thus, the Shepard Broad Law Center was located in the Leo Goodwin Sr. Law Building. The widow of Leo Goodwin Jr. was apparently none too pleased with the new arrangement. To appease her, in 1992 Nova administrators named a new dormitory—the fifth student dormitory built—the Leo Goodwin Sr. Residence Hall. ¹¹

**Campus Construction**

In 1988, the campus remained “very rustic” and to some visitors had the appearance of a wasteland with a “parking lot to nowhere.” Ron
Chenail recalled that several programs were still housed in trailers, affectionately known as modular units. The decision to build the new law building set off a five-year mini-construction boom on campus.

In 1990, the university added the Parker Science annex, but a more intriguing development concerned a man named Joseph (Joe) Sonken, who wanted to give money to the University School. Initially, Sonken wanted his gift to be used for a field house at the University School, but Abe Fischler persuaded him to contribute to the completion of an urgently needed classroom building for the University School. Sonken agreed to give half of the money from the sale of a piece of property he owned. The land sold for $750,000, so Sonken's gift amounted to $375,000. Construction began in 1986 and was stopped once due to lack of money. The University School eventually borrowed money from several financial institutions and completed the classroom building in 1988.

One problem with the gift was that Joe Sonken, a short, cigar-chewing Chicagoan who owned the Gold Coast Restaurant and Lounge in Hollywood, Florida, had a rather unsavory reputation. A 1980 Pennsylvania crime commission reported that his restaurant was a meeting place for mobsters. The report said that Joseph Bufalino, the head of a Pennsylvania crime family, held court in the Gold Coast Restaurant, often meeting with Frank Gagliardi, a member of the New York Gambino family. Sonken, who had never been identified as a mobster, denied that he had ever hosted anyone involved in organized crime. While in Chicago, he had been arrested twice for tax evasion, but both charges were dropped. He also had been arrested for running a gambling house, but that charge was also dismissed.

The Miami Herald published a cover story on Sonken's donation. Sonken said he was just a working man who wanted to give money to a worthwhile charity. "If I'm going to give it," he said, "I want to give it to somebody I thought was worthwhile. It's only money. You can't take it with you."

Joseph Randazzo, headmaster of the University School, said that Sonken viewed the contribution as a "reinvestment in the future of the Hollywood area for the good years he has had in Hollywood." Randazzo called him a friend of the university and said that the school knew "nothing of his past other than that he's a fine upstanding businessman in the community."

The Nova University Board of Trustees apparently came to the same conclusion since there was no opposition to the contribution expressed in the minutes of the board of trustee meetings. Nobody
commented on Sonken’s character and nobody spoke out against accepting his money. Abe Fischler said Nova needed the money, and although he admitted that Sonken was a shady character, he had never been convicted of any crime.\textsuperscript{13} So Nova gladly accepted the gift.

In 1992, the university’s first edifice, the Rosenthal Building, was expanded to include what the university had intended it to be in the beginning: a student union. Nova added a dining hall, a full kitchen, a bookstore, and administrative offices. These additions, long overdue, were hailed by student and faculty alike.

Two other major buildings came on line in 1994 (the Horvitz Building) and 1996 (the Maltz Building). Nova had planned for several years to erect a three-story central administration building with approximately 75,000 square feet of space to house the expanding central administrative staff.

Fischler began the fund-raising process for the new administration building and targeted William (Bill) Horvitz as a major contributor. Horvitz, president of Hollywood, Inc., one of the state’s largest and most prestigious community development firms, had been an early supporter of the South Florida Educational Center and a longtime member of the board of trustees at Nova University. As Fischler explained the situation, Horvitz had not given the university much money from 1964 to 1988, so Fischler and others began to pressure him to part with some of his substantial personal wealth. Horvitz tentatively agreed to a gift of $1 million, but Fischler would not accept that amount since Horvitz had great wealth and Fischler needed a larger sum to pay for the administration center. After years of cultivation by Fischler, Horvitz raised the offer to $2 million, but Fischler wanted $4 million. Horvitz finally ended up giving $2 million, but only after Abe Fischler had left office as president.

One person close to the discussion of the gift said that Horvitz did not give the money to Fischler because he was concerned about Fischler’s financial acumen. Stephen Feldman, who followed Fischler as president, claimed some credit for the final gift of $2 million, but Ovid Lewis, the fourth president of Nova, thought that Horvitz had given the money because of “constant pressure from Abe. Abe was after Horvitz all the time.” Fischler did the groundwork and Feldman closed the deal.

John Santulli, then vice president for facilities management, remembered that the original architectural plan for the Horvitz Building called for a three-story building with 75,000 square feet so there would be room for expansion. When Stephen Feldman became presi-
dent in 1992, he wanted to build the administrative center as inexpensively as possible, so the final product was two stories instead of three. The William and Norma Horvitz Administrative Building became the capstone of the new campus. The distinctive two-story building was organized around a spacious, dome-vaulted rotunda that gave visitors a sense that important activities were taking place at Nova. The center was dedicated on October 27, 1994. Other major donors to the Horvitz Building were honored for their contributions in the form of the Harry and Edith Gampel Rotunda and the Jack and Bernice LaBonte Board Room. Local corporations also supplied funding for the center. The banking community also made sizeable contributions, evidenced by the Wachovia Financial Aid Wing and the SunTrust Institutional Advancement Wing.

By 1997, in need of additional office space, the university rented facilities in the University Park Plaza Shopping Center adjacent to the main campus that housed classrooms, a microcomputer laboratory, the Institute for Learning in Retirement (later the Institute for Retired Professionals), and the offices of licensure and state relations, grants and contracts, and continuing education.

Nova University needed a much larger footprint as it began to grow, and the psychology department, shoehorned into the Mailman-Hollywood Building, had expanded and needed more space. Frank DePiano, then the dean of the Behavioral Science Center, reestablished a former acquaintance with Anna Maltz, the widow of Maxwell Maltz, as a possible donor. Maxwell Maltz, who passed away in 1975, was a brilliant plastic surgeon, author, and lecturer. His 1960 book *Psycho-Cybernetics* sold more than 30 million copies. Maltz discovered that as a practicing plastic surgeon, he could correct a person’s facial scars but could not heal the patient without also eliminating the inner scars. A change in the person’s self-image was more important than any physical changes achieved by plastic surgery. *Psycho-Cybernetics* was one of the first “think positively and you will do well” books designed to improve one’s self-image.

When Maltz retired from private practice, he and his wife bought a house in Fort Lauderdale. He soon learned that the Behavioral Science Center was doing research in behavior modification and biofeedback. The ever-inquisitive Maltz spent quite a bit of time on campus, lecturing infrequently and discussing psychology with students and faculty. Anna Maltz continued to live in Fort Lauderdale after her husband’s death and years later remembered her husband’s interaction with Nova. She was invited to several campus events and enjoyed
her association with the university. DePiano had cultivated her friendship over the years, and since she and her husband had no children, DePiano suggested that a good way to remember her husband was to put his name on a new psychology building.

Prior to his death, a businessman and psychologist named Max L. Hutt had promised money to Nova. DePiano contacted Hutt’s widow and tried to put the two potential donors, Anna Maltz and Anne Hutt, together. The two women did not know each other, but they immediately bonded. Their names were similar, they were exactly the same age, and their husbands were both named Max. Feeling a sense of karma, both women committed to putting up a new structure devoted to psychology. The money became available when both women passed away within months of each other.

By the time the building was complete, the Maltz estate had become worth more than the Hutt estate, so the 68,000-square-foot center was called the Maxwell Maltz Psychology Building and contained the Hutt Wing. The first floor housed NSU’s Community Health Center, with administrative and faculty offices and classrooms on the second floor. The Maltz estate also included works by the famous surrealist artist Salvador Dalí. Maltz had operated on Dalí’s wife, and Dalí had given the paintings to Maltz. The paintings are currently stored at NSU.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the university’s physical plant and maintenance had been neglected. The problem that John Santulli faced, as did everyone at Nova, was a lack of funding. Santulli understood that Fischler had to take whatever monies he could find and plow them back into the academic programs. At the time, it was the correct decision and made sense—there was little other choice. Nova’s position was that landscaping and maintenance were not high priorities. This left very little money for the physical plant, and Santulli could not do a lot of maintenance. He did the best he could with what he had. As Nova’s fortunes improved, so did the landscaping and maintenance of the facilities.

Baudhuin Oral School

Once the Fort Lauderdale Oral School moved on campus in 1984 and became established as part of Nova University, the school made significant progress. The university wanted to expand the purview of the school to include children with communication challenges, and in 1985, the Oral School opened its doors to children with autism. In the
late 1980s, the Baudhuin Oral School entered into a contract with the School Board of Broward County to provide publicly funded special education programs to preschool children with autism and related disorders.17

In 1989, when the Oral School won accreditation from SACS, the inspection team praised the school’s ability to provide each student with an individualized program and allow them the freedom to develop to their potential. The final report also lauded the utilization of the resources of Nova University, especially graduate students who were doing practicums in education, learning disabilities, speech-language pathology, counseling, and psychology.18

Proud of its accreditation, the Oral School broadened its services by adding a new wing. Nova dedicated the new building in 1991 to Jack and Bernice LaBonte for their generous support of the school. The new structure would house the LaBonte Institute for Hearing, Language, and Speech and would help achieve Nova’s goal of having one of the most comprehensive speech-language pathology centers in the country.19 Supporters of the Oral School, intent on further expansion, organized a capital campaign committee. Dolphins quarterback Dan Marino, who had a son with autism attending the Oral School, sponsored a luncheon that attracted 350 guests and raised $31,000.20

By 1994, the Baudhuin Oral School had emerged as a national leader in the fields of special education for students with hearing impairments, autism, or attention deficit disorder (ADD). The Baudhuin School had increased its numbers to 160 students, and the LaBonte Institute had enrolled some 245 graduate students and offered the country’s largest master’s program in speech-language pathology. The Baudhuin School and the LaBonte Institute, according to Jack LaBonte, enjoyed “a productive partnership that reaches a level of excellence far beyond what would be possible for either facility working alone” and brought positive publicity to the university.21

**University School**

At the same time that the Oral School prospered and progressed, the University School did the same. The University School was originally designated as a demonstration school or a lab school. In the lab school setting, Nova graduate students in education could do their teacher training by observing classes, learning teaching methods, and
gaining practical experience. By the mid-1990s, the University School had grown to include the Lower School with prekindergarten through grade five, the Middle School with grades six through eight, and the Upper School, or high school, with grades nine through twelve. The school grew from a small demonstration school to a major college preparatory school with significant resources and well-rounded programs while remaining “true to the founding principles.” The University School was an integral part of Nova University and became one of the then-sixteen centers in the university. It was not, as some observers believed, “affiliated” with Nova; rather, it was part of the university but had the autonomy to run its own programs.22

Hurricane Andrew

In a state known for severe hurricanes, it seemed inevitable that Nova University would feel the wrath of at least one major storm. That event occurred on August 24, 1992, when Hurricane Andrew paid an unwelcome visit to South Florida. At 4:55 a.m. that day, the National Weather Service provided a snapshot of the menacing storm. The strongest winds were around the eye, “cutting across south Dade [County] like a buzz saw blade.” By that time, Homestead, Florida, had been swept by the storm’s most intense winds, with gusts up to 140 to 150 miles per hour. Hurricane forecasters described the storm as “powerful, nasty, compact, speedy, and surprising.” The area had never experienced such a severe storm. It was only the third Category Five storm to make landfall in U.S. history.

At Nova University on August 22, officials feared the worst, although none of the experts could be sure about the final track of the storm. Freshmen had just arrived on campus for the beginning of the fall term, and the university decided that the safest place for the students would be in the Leo Goodwin Jr. Residence Hall, a solidly built, recently completed structure. Brad Williams, vice president for student affairs, remembered telling the students to gather up their mattresses and pillows and huddle in the hallways until the storm passed. The Nova Knight reported that although the students were frightened, “some people in the dorm seem to have had too much fun.” One student commented that “with all the partying going on, it was like we forgot what was going on outside. It was kind of cool. We got to know each other.” President Stephen Feldman, newly arrived in Florida from Connecticut, had no experience in preparing for hurri-
canes. After hearing about storm damage on the campus, he ventured out to check on the students. When he got to the dorm, he found that the students “were great. They were having a hurricane party. They didn’t care.” The new building stood up well to the wind and rain with little damage.

Fortunately for Nova, the storm veered south at the last moment and spared the campus much of the catastrophic damage sustained in Homestead. Andrew uprooted many of the palm trees recently installed by Feldman, but the maintenance staff was able to replant the trees and they survived. Damage to the trailers was significant, and there was some flooding and downed trees and power lines, but overall damage was minimal. Nova had escaped what could have been a disastrous situation. Just a few miles to the south, Andrew had done an estimated $30 billion worth of damage, at the time the most expensive disaster in U.S. history. More than 250,000 people were homeless, people were cut off from their families, there were many power outages and a large number of injuries, and citizens faced the long, heartbreaking task of restoring life to normal.

Nova closed for four days while crews cleared downed trees and debris from the grounds. Administrators arranged for classes to begin and allowed students to make up for lost time. They offered assistance to any students or faculty who needed help. Elaine Poff, who currently works in enrollment and student services, was impressed by Nova’s quick response as the university became a family to those students who had recently arrived on campus and who had been so rudely displaced.


As early as 1990, Abe Fischler had begun to contemplate stepping down from office after twenty-two years (1970–1992) as president. At age 63, he decided that he had done what he had come to Nova to do. “I built a university that had stability, that I knew would make it,” he said. He was also a little tired and knew the school needed new blood, new leadership. In his 1991 resignation letter to the trustees, Fischler wrote that it had been a “most rewarding and exciting twenty-six years at Nova University,” and he had been “proud to have been a part of building an educational institution for the 21st century.” Fischler planned to take a one-year sabbatical before resuming his research as a professor at Nova.
In a personal interview and in his letter of resignation, Fischler spelled out all of the accomplishments of his administration: a balanced budget for six years in a row (1986–1992) and the financial stabilization of the institution; the merger with NYIT; acquisition of the University School and the Oral School; an increase in student enrollment from 57 to 10,600, making Nova the second largest private university in Florida; the emphasis on technological development and innovative course offerings; expansion of the Oceanographic Center; new dorms, with the Goodwin dormitory under construction; renovation of the Rosenthal Building; the eventual completion of the Horvitz and Sonken Buildings; accreditation of the law school, which would soon be on the main campus with a new facility almost completed; moving the business school to the main campus; and, most important to Fischler, his development of the concept of clusters and distance education, which changed the face of American education. Fischler had few regrets about his tenure in office, although he believed that he had too frequently hired the second in command after an administrator had retired instead of bringing in new talent, and he thought he should have spent more time placing Nova’s achievements before the public.24

In an interview with *Nova News*, Fischler said that he would miss dealing with 1,200 to 1,300 unique personalities and “having to cajole and coerce them into keeping the ship moving in a common direction. I won’t miss the pressure of the office or attending so many functions as the university’s representative.” When asked about the negative press Nova had received in the past, Fischler admitted that in the beginning the university tried to oversell what it could deliver—Nova could not be the MIT of the South. Fischler noted that there was a negative reaction to off-campus learning because society was reluctant to accept a new concept. Nova offered bona fide education, he said, by “bringing it to people and utilizing the best instruction. It was a threat to the establishment. Today, much of what we are doing is being done by many other institutions and Nova is not considered ‘way out.’ Other universities are catching up to us.”25

When his resignation became effective on July 31, 1992, colleagues, city and state officials, the board of trustees, and friends congratulated Fischler on his accomplishments. Jim Farquhar said, “One of the greatest things I did was to ask Abe to serve as chief executive officer. It’s not always possible for academicians to cross the lines into administration. . . . I don’t think Nova would have developed as it did without his leadership.” Farquhar, in retracing Fischler’s history
with the university, said that Fischler mainly wanted to teach and do research, but agreed to be president for a couple of years in a time of need. “That turned into twenty-two years.”

Mary McCahill, the first woman to serve as chairman of the board of trustees, admired Fischler’s courage and vision and his successful incorporation of innovative delivery methods into education, which made quality education accessible. The *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel* concluded that Fischler’s “adventuresome imagination and tenacious competitive instinct” were his primary tools for success. Ron Brown, although he often disagreed with Fischler, said he kept things rolling when it seemed impossible for Nova to survive. Fischler exhibited the kind of inspiring leadership and the dedication and intensity that made Nova successful. Brown added, “Otherwise it [Nova] would not be here. There were so many times that it could have disappeared. And there were times that he kept it going by shifting things from one pocket to another. Smoke and mirrors.” In appreciation of Fischler’s services, the Davie Town Council, by proclamation, renamed Southwest 30th Street, from College Avenue to University Drive, as Abraham S. Fischler Boulevard.

There were, of course, detractors who, despite Fischler’s yeoman service, thought he had outlived his usefulness. His opponents declared that he had not been a stellar financial wizard, and after twenty-two years the university needed a change in leadership.

The university launched a nationwide search for Fischler’s successor. The board of trustees hired a search firm and appointed a committee to field applications, interview candidates, and reduce the number of viable candidates to five. Ovid Lewis was not hopeful that Nova could find an outstanding candidate. He said that Nova was still relatively unknown, had experienced financial difficulties, and was not in a position to attract the best people.

Stephen Feldman, who would become the committee’s choice, arrived on campus for an interview on January 24, 1992. Feldman had dinner with Ray Ferrero Jr. and David Rush, the chairman of the search committee, and August Paoli. The following morning, Feldman met with Fischler. They discussed educational philosophies, and Fischler tried to determine if Feldman would be a good fit for Nova. A committee from Nova then visited Western Connecticut State University, where Feldman served as president. The group spoke with faculty, student leaders, and administrative personnel and reported that all recommendations were “very, very good.” Ray Ferrero Jr. and Abe Fischler added their recommendations to those of the search committee.
committee, and the board of trustees offered Feldman a four-year contract. Feldman would assume his duties as president on July 1, 1992.

At the time, Feldman seemed a logical choice. He was a sitting president with eleven years in the post, so he had administrative experience and a strong business background suitable for a business-oriented school like Nova. Although Feldman came from a more traditional academic background, the committee felt he recognized that distance learning was a major component of Nova and had already been doing research in the field.27

After a lengthy discussion with his wife, Feldman accepted the job. He had done due diligence in researching Nova and was impressed with the implementation of its successful distance-learning program. Feldman liked Nova’s inventive way of giving people an opportunity to earn a degree and recognized the university’s success with the law school, the Oceanographic Center, the University School, and the Oral School. Feldman viewed Nova as an interesting and eclectic mix of different ideas and different institutes, both traditional and nontraditional. He admired the board of trustees for its business orientation and concluded that the school had been run in a businesslike way. As an independent institution, it had more flexibility and leeway in making decisions. Feldman knew about the past financial difficulties, but thought the school was now on sound footing and had tremendous potential. Broward County was a large and fast-growing county with its own airport, and Nova was the major educational institution in the county. For Feldman, as with Nova, his decision to come to Fort Lauderdale seemed a sensible decision.


When Stephen Feldman accepted the office of president at Nova, he knew he needed to make the transition from running a public university to presiding over a self-determining private university. The new president realized that in public universities, the trustees were more political; in private universities, they were more business oriented. Feldman believed that “the business of education is business, the culture was a corporate culture. Nova would expand when it
Figure 6.1 Stephen Feldman, PhD, president, 1992–1994. (By permission of Nova Southeastern University Archives, Fort Lauderdale, Florida.)
defined itself as a business, its students as customers and the world of higher education as the competition. If the school managed its affairs efficiently, it would succeed.

Feldman believed that Nova needed to work hard to raise money for a road system on the campus, new dorms, and new buildings for classrooms. Feldman hoped to expand the size of the campus by one-third and to set up an endowment. Also on his wish list: better technology, expanding the undergraduate college and overseas programs, improving the landscaping to recruit new students, a good bookstore on campus, and more favorable press coverage for Nova.

During Feldman’s abbreviated two-year tenure as president, he determined that as a CEO, he needed to spend more time with the trustees and businesspeople in the community and less time with students and faculty. He devoted much of his day to strategizing about the future, meeting with deans, raising money, and consulting with the administrative staff, most frequently with the vice president for development. He wanted to attend as many community events as possible because image and publicity went hand in hand and he wanted the public to be aware of what was going on at Nova.

With a serious decline in undergraduate enrollment in 1992–1993, the university immediately set up an admissions council to coordinate with financial affairs, public affairs, and student life to make the university more attractive to potential enrollees. In addition, Nova coordinated marketing strategies and held a university-wide open house in 1995 that attracted more than 1,000 visitors. The university also tried to keep the tuition as low as possible so it could compete with the University of Miami, which was more expensive than Nova, and Florida Atlantic University, a much cheaper option than Nova. Feldman felt that it was “tucked in nicely between the two.”

Feldman and the board of trustees wanted to tie Nova more directly to the people of Florida, so they chose an interesting group of citizens to recognize by awarding them honorary degrees in the 1994 commencement exercises. All had Florida connections. The list included Lawton Chiles, governor of Florida; Joycelyn Elders, the first African American U.S. surgeon general; Gloria Estefan, a Hispanic singer and community activist; Janet Reno, a Florida native and U.S. attorney general; and Don Shula, coach of the Miami Dolphins.

During his presidency, Feldman made most of the decisions on his own, leaving many of the details to his administrative staff. Feldman respected former President Fischler and had no objection to having him on campus. He later regretted that he did not consult Fischler.
more often, because the former president had such great knowledge of the school’s history. Fischler indicated that while Feldman did contact him from time to time, they were not close and he did not offer much advice to the new president. During Feldman’s time in office, his vice president for academic and student affairs was Ovid Lewis, the former dean of the law school. Lewis recounted that things went smoothly between him and Feldman, although there was no close personal relationship. The president usually requested that Lewis be present when there was an academic component to the meeting, so Lewis handled that part of the portfolio, discussing important issues with the deans and the faculty. Feldman rarely interfered with Lewis in his handling of that responsibility.

In April 1994, Lewis tendered his resignation effective December 31, 1994. When asked why he wanted to leave his post, Lewis said he never felt like he was an administrator. He loved teaching and wanted to get back to his first love. Feldman, who depended heavily on Lewis’s academic expertise, wrote his vice president a letter, saying, “If I had a choice, I would reject your resignation and would force you to continue in this position.” Feldman lauded Lewis for his remarkable contribution to the university over the past fifteen years, and noted that under his leadership the school had grown and prospered. He added that Lewis would be “sorely missed.”29

One of President Feldman’s early goals was to develop the physical plant while improving the landscaping and the general appearance of the campus. Alex Schure once wryly pointed out in the early years the campus bespoke poverty, and others ventured the opinion that even in the early 1980s it still looked much like an airfield. Feldman knew that first impressions were important. If the university looked like a first-class operation, then people would assume it was. If it looked fourth rate, they would assume it was fourth rate. The appearance of the campus was important to those visitors considering enrolling in Nova and to those contemplating giving money to the university. When the Horvitz and the law school buildings were constructed, Nova made certain that while the emphasis was still on the functional, the overall aspect of the structures would be more aesthetic and appealing to the eye.

The board of trustees supported Feldman’s vision for a more attractive campus despite the lack of funding. Arvida, a Florida resort and real estate development company, advised Feldman that the best way to achieve success cheaply was to put in some grass and line the entrance, driveways, and circumference of the campus with
trees. Feldman purchased trees wholesale and planted more than 800, mostly palm trees. Everyone seemed pleased with the campus transformation, and now Nova looked more like a real university. The staff and trustees took pride in the spruced-up appearance and said they felt more of a sense of community. The psychological impact of such a change is hard to gauge, but it certainly helped in recruiting students and faculty. Feldman asserted that the landscaping did not change the academics, but it created a better image for Nova, and in the early 1990s, that was a significant step forward. Feldman’s ideal of a more aesthetic campus came to fruition in later years.30

Feldman had such a short tenure at Nova University that he did not have enough time to achieve many of the very ambitious goals he discussed when he took office. He participated in two major developments that overlapped presidential terms at Nova. He was on board when the agreement for the Miami Dolphins football team to move its practice facility on campus was finalized, but he was not part of the initial planning. Feldman participated in the planning stage for the merger with Southeastern University of the Health Sciences, a momentous decision that altered the future of Nova in many ways, but he was no longer around when the merger was completed.

**Miami Dolphins Training Facility**

In 1988, the Robbie family, owners of the Miami Dolphins professional football team, hired Eddie Jones as president of the football franchise. One of Jones’s first tasks was to upgrade the training facility for the Dolphins. The team had trained at St. Thomas University for many years, but the location had become, according to Jones, “deplorable.” The team did not have a lot of money to build a new facility, so Jones tried to get public money to erect the training center, but this attempt failed.

Jones’s fortunes changed during a casual meeting of the board of governors at the Oral School. Dan Marino, the team’s successful quarterback, was a member of the board. At the end of the meeting, board chairman Jack LaBonte thanked Marino for his help in raising money. LaBonte said, “You are helping us, what can we do for you?” Marino replied that the Dolphins needed a new training facility and asked LaBonte to call Eddie Jones to set up a meeting. LaBonte and Jones met and began discussing a possible move to the Nova campus.
LaBonte contacted Abe Fischler and asked if he had any interest in having the Dolphins locate their training facility on the Nova campus. At first Fischler said he did not have the time to work out an agreement, but LaBonte said he would broker the deal with the Dolphins. Fischler thought it would be a great idea but would be interested only if it did not cost Nova any money.

Eddie Jones of the Dolphins wanted a deal done as soon as possible, because in the era of free agency in football, a team could not be competitive without a first-class training facility. The team also needed a dormitory near the training center where the players could live. Nova would be a good fit as the team would later be able to use the Rolling Hills Hotel for a dormitory; it was one mile from the training center and had bus service to the campus.31

By February 1992, negotiations had proceeded apace, and since the Dolphins needed a training facility immediately, the conversations were put on the fast track. Jack LaBonte, the dominant force in the negotiations, had strong support from Dan Marino and Earl Morrall, a former Dolphins quarterback and the mayor of Davie. The Dolphins wanted Nova University to take the lead in planning, developing, and constructing the training center.32 The original proposal called for Nova to build the facility, which the Miami Dolphins would then lease. The Nova University Board of Trustees agreed to explore the proposal so long as there was no cost to the university. To begin with, ten acres of Nova property on Southwest 30th Street were set aside for the Dolphins facility, and on May 30, 1992, the board of trustees ratified an agreement with the Miami football team.33

The final contract called for the university to build a facility that would initially cost $8.2 million. The Dolphins contributed $3 million, and the university sold $5.2 million in bonds. The team paid off the $5.2 million bond issue and agreed to pay Nova a yearly lease fee for use of the land and the facility. The lease agreement was for forty years. If the team ever abandoned the site and no other National Football League team could be found to replace the Dolphins, the university would take over the facility. The Dolphins paid all tax obligations and upkeep for the facility as if they owned it, although the buildings and the land were still owned by Nova University and would always belong to Nova University.

The Dolphins received a state-of-the-art training center and the university received a long-term lease, with the Dolphins initially paying $145,000 per year in leasing fees—a nice source of extra income for the university.34 The new Dolphins training center included a main
building of 56,400 square feet, with a two-story structure housing the team’s executive offices, coaching and operations staff, and the training facilities. The bleachers could seat 1,000 spectators. The team later added 10,000 square feet for administrative offices and a highly visible pressurized air-conditioned bubble facility to allow for team practice in inclement weather.\footnote{35}

The benefits to Nova were considerable. The ribbon cutting for the new center on July 11, 1993, generated a great deal of publicity and visibility. Because the team was very successful and popular at the time, the new arrangement connected the university with the larger South Florida area. Feldman praised the relationship, as both the Dolphins and Nova University were dedicated to the area’s vitality and economic growth and both institutions were committed to excellence. Nova was not as well-known as it could have been, so the two entities had agreed that whenever the Dolphins facility was mentioned, they had to call attention to the fact that it was located on the Nova campus. The training camp in the summer brought some 1,500 to 2,500 spectators to the campus each day for the team’s twice-daily practices. Dolphins players helped Nova with its fund-raising and in other public activities. The Dolphins held football camps for kids at the training center, and the university occasionally used the facility’s meeting rooms for social events.\footnote{36}

By any assessment, the deal with the Dolphins helped Nova. Nova needed the publicity, and it received the on-campus facility and the recognition at no cost. Nova had new practice fields and the Dolphins’ help when it needed to raise money, but there were now ten acres of land unavailable for university development and expansion.

After completing the deal with the Dolphins, in a totally unexpected move, Stephen Feldman abruptly resigned as president of Nova on June 13, 1994. This was the second occasion in the university’s history (Warren Winstead was the first) when a president had suddenly given up his position. University documents do not provide many details about the circumstances of Feldman’s departure.

On June 8, 1994, in his annual performance review before an executive session of the board of trustees, the board determined that Feldman would not receive a “favorable review.” This negative evaluation had the effect of dismissing him from the presidency. At the same meeting, the board appointed Ovid Lewis as interim president.\footnote{37} Apparently Feldman had asked for a vote of confidence during his annual review, but the board of trustees refused to give it to him. Feldman said that he left because he “succumbed to the call of private
industry.” He subsequently became vice president of Ethan Allen, a home furnishings and design company.

Why did the Nova board end Feldman’s employment with the university? Some observers believed that Feldman had been the wrong hire and was simply not the right man for the job. He had to follow Abe Fischler, who had been president for twenty-two years. Fischler had been innovative and experimental and had built up a large group of loyal supporters. Nova was still in a transition period, and it is always difficult for a new leader to come in and promote a new agenda for any university. For Feldman, Nova was a different culture, much different from a public university. Feldman came from a traditional university where all the resources flowed through the president’s office, and he did not change his modus operandi sufficiently to fit into a different type of school.

Feldman apparently did not have a good relationship with the faculty since he did not visit with them as often as they desired, and his interaction with the board of trustees may have been strained because of the way he viewed his authority. Two of his closest colleagues saw him as being too imperious as a leader. One person recalled Feldman explaining his way of running the university: “If I say it’s green, even if it’s yellow, I expect [my] employees to say it’s green.” Another incident had Feldman saying, “See that picture on the wall? If I say I don’t like that, by tomorrow they will have it down.”

Ovid Lewis did not see Feldman as part of the community of scholars and believed that his approach to governing—ruling by directive and edict rather than by consensus and persuasion—hurt his effectiveness as a leader. It appeared that Feldman, while personable, articulate, and intelligent, had simply not connected with the local community and after two years still seemed like an outsider. He had perhaps alienated some of Nova’s most prominent backers with his haughty behavior, but all of this is conjecture. Whatever the circumstances, by June 13, 1994, Stephen Feldman was no longer president of Nova University.38

**The Ovid Lewis Presidency: 1994–1997**

As discussed earlier, Ovid Lewis had been dean of the law school and worked with Stephen Feldman as vice president for academic and student affairs. With Feldman’s abrupt departure, Nova University was in a quandary. The university faced the very important SACS
reaccreditation process and the beginning of the fall term without a president. The board of trustees had to act swiftly and concluded that it did not have time to conduct a national search. If the board intended to hire from within, there were few alternatives. Ovid Lewis was the logical choice. He had years of administrative experience as dean of the law school and as vice president; he was well-respected and “a proven commodity.” He had worked closely with Feldman, knew more about the inner workings of the institution than anyone else, and would provide continuity.

One issue the board had to consider was Lewis’s earlier declaration that he wanted to retire at the end of 1994. He stated that he did not consider himself an administrator and did not like fund-raising. The board was therefore unsure how Lewis felt about becoming president in 1994. When members of the board approached him about the job, Lewis reasoned that he had no choice but to accept the position, although it was not something he longed to do. He recalled, “What else were they going to do? This guy’s [Feldman] going to be leaving. We’re going to have a vacuum here. So I did agree to accept the position.” Lewis viewed himself as an interim president because “I did not plan to stay on for very long.”

The Nova Board of Trustees, on June 8, 1994, appointed Ovid Lewis as interim president. While Lewis had already stated that he did not plan to stay in the position for long, he strenuously objected to the interim title. The use of “interim” suggested that he was merely an acting president, and the title would undermine his authority and limit his long-term plans. Lewis refused to take the post unless he had the title of president of Nova University. The board of trustees removed the interim tag and Ovid Lewis became the fourth president of Nova University.39

When Ovid Lewis took over as president, he did not have many long-range goals. His first priority was to recruit “the best possible directors for the various programs.” Lewis thought it was important for the university to hire “people who were more effective than we are, who are brighter. Sometimes administrators don’t want to do that; they don’t want to have competition as such, but I think it’s good.” Lewis knew that excellent directors could bring in top-notch faculty. He concluded that he accomplished his purpose by attracting such superior leaders as Joseph Harbaugh as dean of the law school, Donald Riggs to head up the library, and Randy Pohlman, who spoke the language of area business leaders, as dean of the business school. Harbaugh instituted the successful evening program for the law school.
Figure 6.2 Ovid Lewis, JSD, president, 1994–1997. (By permission of Nova Southeastern University Archives, Fort Lauderdale, Florida.)
In 1997, Donald Riggs began planning a long overdue new library facility, which was approved by the board of trustees in 1998. Riggs was also able to restructure and streamline several administrative positions.

President Lewis expected Nova to increase its support and services to the local community. Since South Florida had one of the largest retirement communities in the country, he saw a profound need to improve care for the elderly and organized a gerontology task force to develop the curriculum in gerontology. Nova set up the School of Social Sciences, which included the Institute for Service to Families to provide mediation services. Eventually the school offered an MA in gerontology and an MS in human services administration, along with new courses in death and dying as well as health and nutrition. Later, the School of Social Sciences evolved into the School of Social and Systemic Studies, which offered courses in conflict analysis and resolution, which used negotiation, mediation, and facilitation as an alternative to litigation.

Shortly after assuming office, Lewis sat for an interview with a local journalist. Described as a “brilliant and eclectic lawyer, scholar, and educator,” Lewis spoke briefly of his personal philosophy: “Do good. Avoid evil. Make the world a better place; be empathetic.” He spelled out his role as president: “The name of the game is cooperation and synergy.” Each program should be the best that it can be, and then all of the various programs should work together for the benefit of the university. Lewis favored academic cross-fertilization as he thought it counterproductive that every center seemed to be operating independently of one another. The computer science program should help all the other disciplines in their use of technology. The computer experts followed the president’s suggestion by first developing the electronic classroom to enhance computer-based learning, and then creating a technological marvel, the virtual classroom. Lewis encouraged the law school to work closely with psychology and the medical school, and also share knowledge with other disciplines. He applauded the university’s focus on distance education and its commitment to the idea that education should not be bound by time or place.

Lewis was mainly interested in the acquisition of knowledge, not just information. Knowledge enabled one to understand and use the information acquired. He proposed creating an institute on learning and an institute on pedagogy. The emphasis would be to analyze in-depth the learning process and then teach people how to learn and
how to understand. Lewis never got around to creating these institutes, but it gives one a sense of him as an academic and a scholar rather than an administrator.

Lewis’s first major responsibility was to guide Nova through the important SACS reaccreditation process. Lewis knew that the inadequate library facilities would be a problem. SACS had previously urged Nova to do a better job of linking budgeting and strategic planning, especially resource allocation. To satisfy SACS’s concerns, Nova set aside more funding for the library and to support planning strategies. Nova set up guidelines for grant proposals to be rated by priority and available funds. Lewis managed to organize the campus for the inspection team, and the entire process went very smoothly. In 1998, Nova gained regional reaccreditation for another ten years.

Lewis next focused on Nova’s overseas programs. He closed the fledgling program in Bogotá, Colombia, because, although it made money, it did not meet any of the required SACS criteria for accreditation. He faced a similar problem with the Panama program. The Panama Center did not have a full-time faculty or a library, required by SACS, so Lewis went to Panama to check out the program. The director, Martin Taylor, whom Lewis described as “a very strange fellow,” met Lewis at the airport, handed him a revolver, and said, “Here is your gun.” Naturally the scholarly and genteel Lewis was shocked at the necessity for packing heat and said his experience in Panama “was the closest thing to a western movie he had ever seen.”

Lewis recognized that Taylor, who spoke fluent Spanish, had developed a strong board of advisors and made money for the university by attracting students from the Panama Canal Authority and the U.S. troops garrisoned in the area. However, when the United States began the process of turning the canal over to Panama and the U.S. Army Southern Command pulled out, the Panama Center did not have enough students to survive and the program closed down.

During the Lewis era, improvements in the physical layout of the university included opening of the Center for Psychological Studies and the Community Mental Health Center. The University School, with strong support from Lewis, was selected as a National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence by the U.S. Department of Education and opened a school sports center. The Fischler Center for the Advancement of Education, still one of Nova’s major moneymakers, moved to new quarters in North Miami Beach.
Remembering the founders’ contributions to the progress of the university, Lewis inaugurated the Alumni Silver Medallion Award, given to the alumnus whose service and achievements added to the university’s quality of life. Mickey Segal, who was retiring, was selected for her work with the Family Center, the Oral School and the University School. Lewis said, “Mickey will be missed, but she will never be forgotten. She has been the heart and soul of the Family and School Center. Childhood education would have been dramatically different in the nation had we not been blessed by Mickey’s brilliance.” Her father, A.L. Mailman, was posthumously awarded the President’s Community Award for his work in mobilizing support for the university.45

Lewis constantly referred to Nova as a “university of professional schools” that needed to expand both the numbers and quality of its undergraduates. He praised the flexibility of the university, both in its desire to tailor courses to meet the student needs and its ability to make decisions without the hindrance of an entrenched bureaucracy.

On a typical day, Ovid Lewis would arrive early at his office and spend much of his time, at least twice weekly, meeting with deans. Lewis liked to have the deans discuss their agendas and activities with the other deans so that everyone knew what new proposals had been made. This was part of his theory of synergy: if you got the leaders talking about what they were doing, other centers might get involved in the new proposals. Lewis met with his cabinet at least once a week and had constant communication with the board of trustees. His meetings with the board were essentially informational. “You had to dance with the trustees, but they were virtually invisible,” he said. Lewis viewed most trustee boards as rather passive; they met only once every two months for a couple of hours and the president usually had his suggestions accepted by the group.

As president, he was always available for meeting with students and faculty. He recalled that he “managed by walking.” He thought it essential that students and staff saw the president and got to know him. It was very important that “you be visible and they know that you’re concerned about them and their education.” Unlike his predecessor, he often attended student gatherings and invited student organizations in to lunch with him. Lewis was aware that the students had frequently petitioned for a student union. He understood that the university had to provide social amenities to attract new students to the campus, and once students enrolled at Nova, the university had to maintain and expand those facilities.46
Student Activities Under President Lewis

Nova students and staff realized that the social situation on campus was not what it needed to be. The campus newspaper had long advocated for a student union, but Nova administration had other priorities. Some of the impetus for change came when Brad Williams was hired in 1989 to head the division of student affairs. He immediately noticed that there was no sense of a university, no spirit of unity or any cognizance of campus tradition. Students did not identify themselves as Nova students; their sense of place was tied to the law school or business school. They were law students, not Nova students. Williams set out to change this attitude.

When Williams began his job, there was little to work with in terms of equipment or student interest. Eventually, with constant effort, Williams organized the students into intramural volleyball and flag football teams. He was finally building a sense of community.

Williams decided to sponsor a “welcome back” party at the beginning of the 1989 fall term. He served food, decorated the area, put up posters, and hired a band. Williams was discouraged when only four people showed up. The following Monday, a student named Gina DeGiovani came by his office and asked if she and some of her friends could set up a beach party. Williams consented and promised to support the effort. That next Saturday, some 130 students showed up for the party. Williams then realized that social gatherings worked better if the students, not the dean, planned the event. His job was to encourage them to organize activities on their own.

On another occasion, a student named Rob Armstrong, an energetic young entrepreneur who acted as a deejay at some of the parties, proposed that Nova develop a campus radio station. Williams pronounced it a great idea and within a few years the radio station, later called Radio X (88.5 FM), had evolved from a dorms-only station to one that broadcast to all of Broward County.47

Brad Williams thought that developing fraternities and sororities on campus would contribute toward a greater unity of the student body while affording members new social outlets. He hired a young Scott Chitoff as the graduate assistant in charge of developing a fraternity and sorority system. When Chitoff began his difficult task, there was little knowledge of or interest in fraternities or sororities among the 550 to 600 undergraduate students since there had never been any Greek letter organizations on campus. Chitoff pitched a tent with a sign announcing “Greek Life at Nova,” which elicited a strong
response. Nova inaugurated the Greek system in 1993, and by 2012 there were eleven fraternities and sororities. Of these eleven, there were three Pan-Hellenic sororities, three fraternities, two Hispanic organizations, and three historically African American fraternities.

The hardest task for Chitoff was to persuade commuter students to get connected to the school and to return to campus after class for social activities, athletic contests, and games. He organized events like a twenty-four-hour softball game, homecoming celebrations, and concerts. The university made some strides toward creating a social fabric on campus, but it was not until enrollment increased and the school had successful athletic teams that students had a sense that they were Nova students. By 2011, the social programs had expanded to the point where there were ninety-five staff members in the Division of Student Affairs.

From 1987 through 1998, Nova’s athletic programs advanced from a minor presence on campus to an integral part of the university. In 1990–1991, Nova University joined with seven other NAIA schools to form the Florida Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (FIAC). In 1992, the FIAC changed its name to the Florida Sun Conference (FSC). That same year, the men’s soccer team finished 11-5-3, and in 1993 the Knights baseball team and the women’s volleyball team both won their first-ever Florida Sun Conference championships. In 1994, Nova added softball as its fourth intercollegiate women’s sport, and one year later augmented the program with women’s soccer. Women’s basketball became the sixth women’s sport in 1998. That same year, the softball team collected its fourth straight FSC championship. The university remained a member of the NAIA, but as the number of teams increased, the athletic director began discussions about becoming an NCAA Division II member.

President Lewis approved of the athletic teams’ progress and was cognizant of the students’ concerns and goals. He had the same interaction with the university staff as he had with students. At the end of the academic year, he would send a nice note and a small gift to thank people for their hard work and achievements. Lewis also managed to send out birthday cards to everyone. “I thought it was important that they know they counted,” he said.

By the middle of 1998, Ovid Lewis had begun counting the days until he could retire. He resisted going to public events and community meetings. He would occasionally visit some civic clubs, like the Rotary Club, and made short appearances at other groups, but he
“did not particularly enjoy it,” he said. Lewis revealed that he would have been much happier if he had remained dean of the law school.

Lewis, as was his wont, often understated his abilities, but it was generally recognized that he was not as good an administrator as he was an academic. Everyone agreed that he was a brilliant scholar and a true academician. Ed Simco called him “a very bright individual, very capable, very knowledgeable, and not against innovation, but still sound in the academics.” Virtually everyone liked and respected Ovid Lewis, but he always preferred to write and think and grew tired of administrative duties that did not interest him. In May 1997, Ovid Lewis agreed to step down as president of Nova Southeastern University on January 31, 1998.51

Despite his desire to leave administrative worries behind, Ovid Lewis made significant contributions to Nova University. He increased the size and prestige of the law school, providing it with able and stable leadership. As vice president for academic and student affairs, he strengthened the liberal arts program, gave significant aid to the computer center and computer science, and worked hard to expand distance learning at Nova. While vice president, he actively participated in the dramatic merger with Southeastern University of the Health Sciences. Lewis was the point person in the SACS reaccreditation effort, and he saw Nova become the largest independent college in Florida. Under his leadership, Nova increased funding for the library and opened the first dental school in the country in twenty years. Nova either completed or dedicated more than $70 million in construction during his reign. Lewis worked assiduously to expand social and athletic opportunities for students and continued to encourage them in their academic pursuits.

Ovid Lewis never gave up on his grand desire to spread knowledge and learning. After his retirement he ventured the opinion that the business mentality had become too strong at Nova and overshadowed the academic side of things. He remembered one trustee coming up to him after a meeting and chiding him for “using such big words.” Taken aback by the trustee’s pronouncement, Lewis explained that he just “tried to use the appropriate terms.” It was just this sort of anti-intellectual attitude and lack of sophistication that distressed Lewis.52 Nonetheless, when his university called him to serve in a time of uncertainty, he twice rose to the challenge and gave the best that he had.