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Education • **10 Minutes With**

Russell Sage College's Matthew Shaftel wants to expand the institution thoughtfully



Matthew Shaftel is the president of Russell Sage College. The institution is moving toward a merger with the Albany College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences.



By Luke Nathan – Reporter, Albany Business Review
Jun 5, 2025

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Story Highlights

- Matthew Shaftel became Russell Sage College's 11th president last summer.
- Russell Sage College plans to merge with Albany College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences.
- Shaftel: "You're running a business, and the business is to serve students in the community."

After reading "The Catcher in the Rye" and "The Official Preppy Handbook," the latter a sendup of Northeast elites that at the time he took earnestly, Matthew Shaftel applied to far-flung boarding schools without telling his parents.

When two of the schools sent recruiters to his middle school in Tucson, Arizona, the self-described "angsty teen" asked his dad to come in and meet them.

"The recruiters convinced my dad that this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, that boarding schools do actually exist," Shaftel recalled.

Shaftel, whose family was of modest means, found himself enrolled at Phillips Academy Andover, a prestigious Massachusetts prep school.

"Their motto was 'youth from every quarter,'" Shaftel said. "I certainly benefited from that approach and ended up in an environment that I could have never imagined."

As a higher-ed administrator – last summer he became the 11th president of Russell Sage College – Shaftel has drawn inspiration from his experience at Andover, where in his first year he spent nights talking music theory over cookies with a house counselor.

"I am all about ... what I like to call the 'ecology of learning,' where the entire environment is created so that the student is at the center," he said.

You're a scholar. You're also an administrator. Tell me about how you started on these two dual tracks. For some period, I thought maybe I would end up in a high school where they were innovating with curriculum. But Florida State called me, and they had a top-five doctoral program in music theory. I didn't even realize it was happening to me. About four days into being a faculty member, somebody asked me to run our Music Living-Learning Community. We built it from zero students to 185 live-in students within a couple of years. We offered core classes in the building so that students could feel like they have that community learning at a massive public university.

I had a really great adviser who came to me probably five years into my work as a faculty member, and I became the editor of one of the two premier journals in my field. I loved that work. I loved working with other people's research and helping to shape it.

And that field is? Music theory. It's really the study of how music gets put together – mathematically, architecturally and linguistically. How does it function as a language? How does it function as a geometry? The math brain and the linguistics brain kind of come together.

Can you talk about your [scholarly] work? My own personal research has been around vocal music from about 1825 to about 1940. If it's vocal and it happened during that time period, I'm interested in it.

Thinking about the recent influx of [former College of] Saint Rose students here, the spinning up of programs in relation to that, the pending merger with [Albany College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences]: Things are in flux in higher ed, to say the least, but it seems like there's a lot of opportunity as well, perhaps, for Sage. You're running a business, and the business is to serve students in the community. There's two choices, you shrink or you grow. There's no middle point where you're just stable.

We [were] created in 1916 as an institution that does both professions and deep learning on the liberal arts side. We are not a liberal arts institution. We are this weird, unique hybrid. Half of our students are graduate students, and they're in the professions. We have had the largest nursing program in the region for over 100 years.

Every one of my colleagues that I meet who's a president in another institution is trying to figure out how they become us, because the diversification of the portfolio is so critical. While it might seem like we're just expanding broadly, we are being very thoughtful. It's about workforce partnerships, it's about leaning into our health identity, and it's about ensuring that our students have the ability to do "and."

When this ACPHS partnership came up, this fits exactly with who we are trying to become, and we fit exactly with who they are trying to become. In order to run a small private college, you just need an economy of scale.

[The merger also makes sense] because [of] what students want. We're asking students to come in at 18 and enter a six-year doctoral program to become a pharmacist. Well, for goodness' sake, it doesn't make sense to so many of today's students.

Suddenly, now they're going to have a comprehensive university where they have choices. You can start that program, but if you also want to come over and do theater, you can. You want to live on the Albany campus and play baseball, you can, but you can also pursue biomedical sciences and do top-flight research.

Every one of our legal partners, our consultants, as we are trying to work through what is an incredibly complex regulatory environment, has said, "This is the best merger we have seen."

Interview has been edited and condensed.

Matthew Shaftel

Title: President, Russell Sage College

Age: 51

Grew up: Tucson, Arizona

Lives now: Troy

Education: Bachelor's degree in music, master's degree and doctorate in music theory, all from Yale University.

Family: Shaftel and his wife, Jen Murphy, have five children between them

Next time you see him: Ask him about composer and songwriter Cole Porter

Russell Sage College

Student enrollment for fall '24: 2,790*

Percent increase from prior year: 35.17%*

Combined assets of Sage and ACPHS: $246 million**

*According to data from The List

**Based on current figures. Merger anticipated to be completed in fall of 2027.