Scholars in neuroscience and the Spanish Golden Age were among those recognized May 1 at a University of Vermont dinner for retiring faculty. They sipped cabernet and nibbled artichoke appetizers in the restored Burlington mansion that serves as the school’s Alumni House. A pianist plonked out the jazz standard “All of Me.”

The happy occasion grew serious after a sit-down dinner. That’s when each professor was invited to the front of the dining room to receive a congratulatory plaque from the university’s 26th president, Tom Sullivan.

More than once, he placed a comforting hand on the shoulder of a professor who choked up while saying goodbye to a career and hello to the title of “emeritus.”

Sullivan, whose presidency turns 5 this July, has distinguished himself as a levelheaded leader of Vermont’s flagship university.

“He comes across as a very serious thinker, you know, somebody who is providing a very steady hand of leadership for the institution,” said UVM athletic director Jeff Schulman.

Since Sullivan was installed at UVM in 2012, the slim 68-year-old, who wears carefully tailored suits accented with pocket squares and shiny cuff links, has helped raise $418 million in donations and overseen a building spree on the hilltop campus.
The cranes hovering over UVM and the ubiquitous stretches of construction fencing are visible evidence of growth. Sullivan has pushed for big investments in science, technology, engineering and math — most notably with the four-year construction of a $104 million STEM Complex.

Sullivan’s also big on business. On Friday, he donned a hard hat for the umpteenth time as he shoveled a symbolic mound of earth at yet another groundbreaking, this one for Ifshin Hall at the UVM Grossman School of Business.

As Sullivan nears his five-year anniversary, UVM’s trustees are conducting a comprehensive review of his performance, as required by university rules and his 2013 contract — an open-ended agreement with no expiration date. The outcome will help determine how much of a raise Sullivan, who earns $437,635 annually, receives.

Sullivan can claim progress toward certain goals set out in a 2013 strategic plan.

International students make up 5 percent of UVM’s 10,200 students, a marked jump from the 1 percent enrolled when Sullivan took the reins. Those students pay full freight, helping to subsidize the university. The SAT scores of entering students are up slightly, as is the percentage of those who ranked in the top quartile of their graduating high school class.

Other goals remain elusive for Sullivan. UVM’s four-year graduation rate sits at 64.4 percent, with little real progress made toward a 70 percent target set four years ago. First-year students return at a rate of 86 percent, short of a 90 percent goal.

And while Sullivan has attracted more foreign students, such an approach has disadvantages. International applications are down since President Donald Trump issued executive orders limiting immigration and travel, Sullivan conceded.

When it comes to bringing in the dough, though, Sullivan has excelled. He’s closing in on a $500 million fundraising goal that UVM launched in 2012. The comprehensive capital campaign known as Move Mountains is the school’s most ambitious ever.

The cash is crucial in a state that ranks near the bottom in public support for higher ed. Vermont’s small population means UVM must continue to generate most of its revenue from tuition, grants and private fundraising, according to Sullivan.

“If UVM is to have a present and a future, we have to be successful on the private philanthropic side,” Sullivan said in an interview with Seven Days Friday in his wood-paneled office in the Waterman Building. “Because the state isn’t and can’t support us the way that the university has to be supported for it to increase quality and increase opportunity for students and to increase excellence.”

Sullivan’s predecessor as president, Daniel Fogel, resigned in 2011 following a controversy involving his wife, Rachel Kahn-Fogel, a volunteer fundraiser for the university. An amorous connection between Kahn-Fogel and a colleague in the development office raised conflict-of-interest concerns and triggered an internal investigation. Though Fogel left the presidency, he continues to teach at UVM.

In the wake of the tumult, Sullivan’s equable temperament and steady-going management style have elicited praise from people on campus — and from donors off campus.
“He’s not going to wow you initially, but we think the world of him,” said Grant Gund, a member of UVM’s class of 1991 and the son of billionaire Gordon Gund. “He gets it. He never comes on strong, and he connects in a way that goes far beyond fundraising ... I’ll just say that I really enjoy the guy.”

"He’s not going to wow you initially, but we think the world of him."

GRANT GUND

That relationship has paid dividends. The Gund family has given numerous gifts, including a $6 million donation announced last month to establish the Gund Institute for Environment at UVM.

Such naming rights have proven a big part of Sullivan’s fundraising approach. He travels around the state and country to woo donors, sometimes bringing along deans and top administrators, including Schulman.

Donors, especially big ones, want face time with the leader of the school. “It provides a sense of priority from the institution’s perspective,” Schulman said. “And there’s certainly no arguing with the success of our capital campaign.”

Last year, the school announced a $66 million gift to the medical school — its biggest ever — from alumnus Dr. Robert Larner, who grew up in Burlington and attended UVM on a scholarship. In thanks, trustees voted to name the medical school after Larner, who gave approximately $100 million to the university over his lifetime. He died last month at age 90.

Larner’s most recent gift was the largest ever made to a public university in New England — and a major coup for Sullivan. Granted, New England state schools don’t compare with larger public institutions such as the University of Oregon, which reeled in a single $500 million gift last year, or elite private universities such as Stanford, which picked up a $400 million gift.

But Sullivan’s congenial personality, energetic fundraising schedule and ambition seem to be paying off. He’s actively courting donors for an $80 million multipurpose center that includes a major upgrade to UVM’s on-campus hockey arena and a new basketball gym. The lobby, locker rooms and center itself could bear the names of donors, according to Schulman.

Nationally, some critics say naming rights create a sense that schools are being auctioned to the highest bidder and leave fewer slots for scholars, students and athletes who might deserve to see their names on a building. The Gutterson Fieldhouse, for instance, is named for a UVM student who won the Olympic gold medal for long jump in 1912.

The Gutterson name will stay on the athletic complex, but the hockey arena’s ice sheet might be renamed — for a donor, Schulman said.

Sullivan believes conferring naming rights honors generosity and inspires other potential donors to say, “Gee, maybe we could do something similar, too.”
But deep pockets aren't just necessary to get your name on the building. At UVM, you need plenty of money to get in the building.

Though scholarship aid has increased under Sullivan, the sticker price is daunting. Yearly tuition, room, board and fees currently run about $29,000 for in-state students and $52,000 for out-of-state students. The in-state rate is among the highest for a public school in the U.S. Vermont's K-12 student population has been declining for 20 years, so UVM increasingly draws on out-of-state students to make up the difference. This year, they represent 72 percent of undergrads — up from 57 percent in 1995.

Sullivan said he's addressing cost issues with new scholarship money and programs such as the Catamount Commitment. Established last year, the program waives student and application fees for some low-income, in-state students.

Vermont students still want to attend the school but are often scared off by the sky-high tuition costs, according to Matt Jacobs, a sophomore who graduated from Enosburg Falls High School. He attends UVM tuition-free on a Green and Gold scholarship, offered annually to the valedictorian of every Vermont public high school. The electrical engineering major would love to see the program expanded, perhaps to the top five graduates in each class.

"I'm a firm believer that anyone should be able to get an education," said Jacobs.

Trustees have backed the university's investments in STEM and business courses. But others worry that the liberal arts are being left behind.

"Tom Sullivan has been a fine president, very self-effacing, and deeply committed to UVM. But which UVM is the question. The [College of Arts and Sciences] has been hit hard by a number of departures that have not been replaced," UVM political science professor Garrison Nelson said in an email.

Meanwhile, the university is competing for federal science funding against institutions with a much stronger and longer commitment to STEM, which puts UVM at a disadvantage, Nelson believes.

His worry is that "UVM will be left with funding crumbs from the U.S. science establishment while the liberal arts programs, which have defined UVM for most of the past two centuries, will languish." The transition, Nelson thinks, is part of "a vainglorious reach for an elusive pot of federal scientific gold that has never been how UVM has met its bills."

Sullivan himself has a background in the liberal arts. He grew up near Chicago and majored in political science at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, before attending law school at Indiana University. He practiced law for several years before jumping into academia, eventually becoming dean of the University of Minnesota law school.

His wife, Leslie Black Sullivan, often accompanies him to events and donor visits. The two met 17 years ago in Minneapolis when both were on the board of the University of Minnesota's art museum.

"I thought he was very charming," Leslie Sullivan said. He had a compelling presence, she added: "I felt like many people respected him a great deal, and that was sort of an aura that he put off."
Sullivan eventually transitioned from law-school dean to an even bigger job: provost at the University of Minnesota, a sprawling Big Ten school with tens of thousands of enrolled students.

When Sullivan was hired at UVM — a much smaller university — it was a return to Burlington for his wife, who graduated a Catamount in 1977.

The couple resides at the UVM president’s official residence, a 1914 Colonial Revival at South Williams and College streets. In their free time, they walk their Australian shepherd, ride bicycles, hike and cook — with Tom Sullivan playing sous chef to Leslie Sullivan’s head chef.

Tom Sullivan said he has no plans to leave or to become an emeritus president quite yet. He’d like to see the Move Mountains campaign through to its successful conclusion in 2019, for example.

“We’ve still got a lot to do at UVM,” he said.