Creighton's president, the Rev. John P. Schlegel, S.J., is the man behind the school’s ambitious expansion program and record enrollment. And he makes a mean plate of risotto.

Creighton University President John P. Schlegel’s residence is a spacious apartment atop Heider Hall on the Creighton campus. Schlegel entertains around 1,000 guests a year there. Visitors to Schlegel’s residence can expect two things: a spectacular bird’s-eye view of Creighton’s ambitious campus expansion, and a hot plate of risotto, a rice dish Schlegel learned to cook in Tuscany, Italy. “He is the risotto king of Omaha,” says Schlegel’s friend, attorney Steve Bruckner. Cooking is how Schlegel relaxes and how he forms relationships for the university. “It’s a way to show people they mean something to you,” he says. Those relationships have resulted in a period of unprecedented growth in Creighton’s 126-year history. Some $83 million worth of construction projects are either completed or in progress. Projects include:

- An ultra-modern soccer stadium, the finishing touches of which will be completed this fall.
- “Davis Square,” red-brick town homes for juniors and seniors, which now anchor the university’s eastward expansion. The town homes are the first of three planned.
- A new student mall, which was renovated for beauty and more green space and to encourage interaction and socialization among students.
- The purchase of property between Webster and California Streets and 30th and 32nd streets. Now used for parking, the land will eventually be used for buildings.
- An expansion of the central mall, which will stretch from 25th St. to 27th St. It’s now up to 21st street.
- Seventeen new bronze statues on campus, including a statue of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the Jesuit Order founder.
- Establishment of the Creighton University Medical Center.
- Expansion of the Integrated Science Center, which includes the new Illinois-Ide Science Building and renovated Rigge Science and Crime Health Sciences buildings.
- An aggressive biomedical research program.
- Bruce Rohde, chairman of ConAgra Foods Inc. and vice chairman of the Creighton board, says he’s been impressed with Schlegel’s ability to inspire teamwork. “He rallies people and unites them,” Rohde says. “He’s a good communicator, fair, flexible, adaptable and versatile.”
- Rohde has been a dinner guest of Schlegel’s on many occasions. In fact, he presented Schlegel with a set of several place settings of ConAgra china on which to serve his meals.

One of Schlegel’s favorite dinner games, his guests say, is to have his visitors guess the secret ingredient in whatever he’s prepared. Bruckner has never heard anyone name the secret ingredient. “Sometimes I wonder if there is one,” he jokes.

Schlegel was recruited to the Creighton presidency in 2000. At the time, he had been the president of the University of San Francisco for nine years. Prior to that, he served as the associate and academic vice president at John Carroll University (1996-2001), the dean of arts and sciences at Marquette University (1994-1996) and academic dean of Beloit College (1982-1994).

Before embarking on his professional career, Schlegel studied at the University of London and earned a Bachelor of Divinity degree from the University of Oxford in 1977. He then returned to England to work for a church charity in international relations at Oxford University. He returns from London, in 1973. “I lived being in England,” Schlegel says. “I took away from that six years the realization that the world is incredibly diverse and my destiny, whatever it is in the university world, had an aspect of diversity to it.”

He brought his passion for diversity to Creighton. He immediately initiated an Office of Multicultural and Community Affairs for Health Sciences, an annual city-wide Diversity Summit and an annual CEO Breakfast for corporate Omaha. He began a Women’s Resource Center.

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Story by Judy Horan Photos by Jacqueline Lorince
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Besides reading and the
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Schlegel attends every
Creighton home basketball game for
men and women's basketball games.
He also attends most
Creighton's soccer games.
He hit up
onto the field of Creighton's new
soccer stadium on Oct. 15th
to dedicate it.

“It’s rapidly becoming one of
the best fields in the country
because of the quality of its turf
and the fact it’s in a ‘bow’,” he
says, “and that it’s built exclu-
sively for soccer.”

He’s committed to making
the soccer program a
community-wide resource.
The Omaha Symphony played there
on Sept. 13.
Schlegel's tall, lean presi-
dent is an athlete himself.
He exercises 45 minutes, five
days a week and plays racquetball,
squash and tennis with friends,
faculty and students. He was on
the crosstown team and played
on the hockey wall in graduate school
at Oxford University in England.
Over the door of his office
hangs an car used by the running
team that Schlegel founded and
coached at Creighton when he
was the university’s assistant aca-
demic vice president from 1978
to 1982. The car is insured.
“To our founding father,”
Just as Schlegel exercises his
body, he does spiritual exercises
during daily prayer.
Creighton's Retreat Center in
a rural area near Griswold, Iowa, is
his “get-away” place. It’s where
he goes for serious reflection.

Though the church ended up
as his calling, Schlegel says
“Father Schlegel has taken a vow of poverty.
I own nothing.”

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