

Excellence in Education

Experts Discuss Key Issues, Trends

By Tom Schuman

Few will dispute that Indiana is blessed with a variety of strong higher education institutions. The lineup includes two of the country's leading research campuses to other public entities that offer a variety of options and a diverse collection of private colleges and universities. But does the state have an effective higher education system? That answer is less clear. Some of the factors outlined in the previous story – too much remediation, graduation rates that prove lacking, not enough adults with college degrees – illustrate the challenges. Discussing those issues and other factors and trends is a panel of experts:

Participants:

- **France Córdoba**, president at Purdue University (www.purdue.edu) since July 2007
- **James Edwards**, president at Anderson University (www.anderson.edu) since 1990
- **Jamie Merisotis**, who came to Indiana in January as president of the Lumina Foundation for Education (www.luminafoundation.org) after more than 20 years of work in education policy
- **Chris Murphy**, a member of the Indiana Commission for Higher Education (www.che.in.gov) for six years and chairman since 2006

Dollars and sense

While the mission is educating Indiana's young people, colleges and universities face many of the same cost factors as other businesses. Increased health care outlays, technology that changes rapidly and the competition for highly qualified professors are among the contributors to rising tuition rates.

"It has become absolutely essential that we are state of the art, that we are connected, that we are on the electronic highway that goes through the state," Edwards notes, adding that "it's embarrassing what we pay teachers on any level, and I include the colleges in that as well."

The competition for talent only increases at the research university level, according to Córdoba. "If we want to be among the very best universities in the world, and we do, then we're competing with the world and all the opportunities that are being offered in terms of benefits and workplace and quality of life and faculty compensation to a talented cohort of people.

"Competing for that talent is very expensive. And that talent wants the best facilities in order to do the research that they need to do to be on the (cutting) edge."

Throw in the fact that too many families don't plan far enough in advance financially and there is a recipe for trouble.

Murphy concurs that uncontrollable costs keep going up and families need to do their part with proper financial preparation. He does point out, however, that professors are directly involved in far fewer courses and classroom hours than 15 or 20 years ago. "They may be more productive intellectually, but it's not in terms of getting people through the system."

Córdoba points to three factors in that equation: the rise in graduation student education, the increased mentorship of those graduate students and companies abandoning in-house research and relying on universities to fill that critical need.

Merisotis says that basic research and development is shifting to education at a higher rate in the United States than in other countries. He also describes a somewhat unique system in which cost and price are not directly related.

"We're one of the only industries you can think of where we don't charge a price that is equal to or greater than the cost of producing the product. The cost of production is significantly higher than the price charged for every college and university in America."

Whether cost controls will lead to price reductions is a question he asks and answers.

"There is a differentiation between our cost structures and our price structures," Merisotis

continues. "Price setting, particularly in higher education, is largely a political process. Legislators are involved; governing and coordinating boards are involved. The universities have their own internal processes. This makes for very messy business, (a) to explain to the public; and (b) to do anything about."

Mission definition

The investment in talent and the specific roles of colleges and universities are closely related. "There is a different cost structure for each of those faculties relative to its mission," Murphy offers, "and when you get 'mission creep,' you get inefficiencies and a lot more expense."

Murphy, a South Bend bank executive whose father-in-law helped create the commission and served as its first chairman, says that distinctions among public college and university missions were made a decade ago and that current efforts are intended to further define those roles. He explains why that is so important.

"Universities and colleges are just like any human being or group of human beings. There's ego involved and there's also self-preservation. If the incentives are set up so all the money is going to research universities, I'm going to become a research university because I want the money.

"If economic development is the word that's used for getting money from the Legislature or anywhere else, I'm going to become an engine of economic development," he continues. "I may have to create a whole bunch of programs that do that so I can attract the money.

"So, if we're not real clear about how we divide up the money, what we're trying to divide it for, what we're holding people responsible for and how we reward them, everything morphs into trying to get as much money as they can from as many pots as they can."

Part of the solution is specific, well-crafted incentives. Murphy offers an example.

"We've taken a couple of campuses and said they are mature campuses. They're research universities. They're not going to get an incentive for adding population in terms of the student body. But, on the other hand, we're going to match their research that's brought from outside the state or if its federally funded research, and we'll match that to incent them to put their energies into those things."

Proper preparation

Remediation needs and the growing community college system also come into play.

Córdova, with an illustrious background including her role as chief scientist at NASA, is not surprisingly taken a data-driven approach to understanding Indiana's strengths, weaknesses and higher education outcomes. That information shows an overabundance of research

capabilities (with the Purdue-West Lafayette and Indiana-Bloomington campuses) compared to other states.

She terms it an "opportunity that isn't matched by the academic preparation of the students that we're turning out from high school."

Too many students, she says, are woefully underprepared to take basic gateway courses at Purdue in math, biology and chemistry. The solution?

"First, you need to be required to take it (proper math classes in high school) and second, you need a teacher who can teach it. It's one and two – not one or two," Córdova confirms. "Several other states that we have studied have done that to enormous effect. Within two or three years, they've changed the capacity for learning of students.

"The ugly little thing that is not being said when people are complaining about (college) graduation rates is that we're accepting, we're giving access to students that really are not on course for graduating. That's a very sad thing."

While all can agree on the notion that everyone has a reasonable right to receive a college education, Murphy says part of the problem is that the expectation for many in Indiana is a right to go to Bloomington or West Lafayette.

"People go to the wrong place to start out with," he affirms. "They're going through social change. They're trying to decide what they want to do. We have too many kids in remediation." The higher the number of remediation courses corresponds with a rapidly decreasing chance of graduation – on time or at all.

Ivy Tech is the wild card. Expectations are high that a fully functioning community college can help alleviate the challenge.

Edwards recalls that colleagues often gathered to ponder the impact of Ivy Tech transforming from its technical education roots. The consensus among most was positive.

"I heard on many occasions people saying when they get good, they will help us. They will be providing access and resources that will allow us not to creep into that mission," he states. "I

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*Jamie Merisotis
Lumina Foundation for Education*



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Anderson University*



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Ranking rhetoric

Ranking of colleges and universities, and their programs, has become a profession of its own. Are the various ratings, led in popularity by *U.S. News & World Report*, good or bad?

"Yes," Merisotis claims. While the purpose of *U.S. News* is to sell magazines and presumably help students and parents make college choices, few cite the rankings as an influencing factor. Merisotis elaborates on why they persist and the good-bad debate.

"Part of it is human nature. People like order. They like hierarchy. Part of it is that alumni care a lot about rankings and, therefore, the colleges and universities care a lot about rankings because what alumni think contributes to their eventual donations to the institution," he observes.

"The good or bad depends on how the institution responds to the rankings." Some, he adds, have done so in a very positive manner. The reputational part of the rankings proves to be more controversial. An admitted long-term self-critic of the methodologies used, Merisotis concludes, "I've also come to the conclusion that it's foolhardy to think that you're going to wish away rankings. They're not going anywhere."



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*France Córdova
Purdue University*

Edwards deadpans that he "developed tremendous skills as a critic of rankings until we were more highly regarded." The reputation aspect, he says, evolves into personal letters and glossy magazines from all over the country touting various college and university achievements. He would much rather focus his time and efforts on actual outputs, not who has the best public relations effort.

Rankings that are lesser known outside higher education circles have more value for those involved in the process. Murphy touts the Shanghai rankings, based on China's effort to measure how to make its universities competitive internationally. Merisotis says the methodology is not up to par, but that the idea of measuring performance in the international marketplace is very powerful. These and other rankings have become popular throughout the world.

Córdova lists Academic Analytics as a newer entry in the process, one that strives to focus on productivity (publications, citations, research dollars, etc.) per faculty member. A surprising outcome was that three liberal arts departments and the school of hospitality and management emerged as national leaders at a Purdue campus best known for its engineering and agriculture prowess.

Exit plan

Graduation rates are one of the five focus areas of the higher education commission's plan. The issue is broad and complicated, according to Murphy, but one that must be addressed. That includes the fact "that society has become a whole lot more accepting of kids staying in school for a lot longer than they need to. A lot of that is right at the parents' level.

"But it is ineffective and inefficient for people who start out saying I want to finish in four years to take six years or more to get out," Murphy reiterates. "They put off being able to actualize the income improvement that comes from the education. Many of them don't complete it at all. That's just a bad thing all the way around. We need to focus on graduation, time to completion and graduation rates."

Edwards offers, and his roundtable participants agree, that independent colleges and universities are doing a better job in this area. He also shares several anecdotes that demonstrate what is possible.

"There's a family in Fort Wayne that had two kids, among their three or four, at Anderson and they made a deal. 'We will pay for four years. If you get out early, we'll give you the money. We'll give you the difference,'" he discloses. "And I sat at a banquet with a business student who was getting out in three and a half years and taking the money for the last



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semester to be a stake in his business future. His family loved it. You know, it can be done.”

Córdova, who earned her bachelor's degree in three and a half years, knows that improvement is the goal, saying, “I'm distressed that ours (graduation rate) is as low as it is. It's about 72%.”

She believes that progress can't be made without more information. Data collection for different groups – those who voluntarily leave as well as those who flunk out – will be followed by interviews with those former students. “You can't attack a problem until you understand all the different factors.”

Preparation comes into play again and, no matter the setting, making sure that students are ready to tackle the postsecondary environment.

“The idea of switching from high school graduation to college readiness is, I think, a really useful thing for the high schools,” Merisotis offers. “Getting people through a high school curriculum is no longer sufficient. They've got to be ready to do college-level work. It is increasingly a requirement in our economy. There's no way around that.”

Partners and prospects

In their closing comments, the two university presidents turned to economic development and existing/new partnerships.

“Our communities that are fortunate enough to have colleges are fortunate to have an engine of culture and development,” says Edwards, using the Flagship Enterprise Center incubator in Anderson and its alliance between Anderson and Purdue universities as an example. “They are all over the state, and I think we're blessed to have them.”

Córdova sees a cycle developing. “If we can produce more economic development through our universities and through the investment in those (institutions), we will in turn produce more for the state to give back for opportunity costs. Then we can have more and different kinds of partnerships with others outside the state going forward. That will be an investment that has an even greater return for higher education.”

Merisotis is impressed with what he has learned about Indiana thus far. “There is an alignment here that I think is fairly unique in that you have the political, the business and the higher

education sectors generally trying to work together to solve the state's economic and social issues. I've worked in some states in the last few years where that compact does not exist. So there's a great foundation here.”

Solving the current challenges, unfortunately, is simply not enough. “You can't design a higher education system for what's happening today,” he concludes. “You've got to design that system for what could happen tomorrow. That flexibility is going to

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be a critical part.”

Murphy believes the colleges and universities are working with others committed to the cause “to try and make some really good things happen in Indiana. And that’s exciting.” He closes, though, with a warning that higher education changes are not a cure-all for the brain drain of Indiana college graduates leaving the state.

(The perception in some circles is) “we’re going to do this because we’re going to solve the brain drain, and it is not the brain drain. The brain drain is stopped by having jobs and opportunity. There is a long-term impact by educating your population that you will have that opportunity, but it’s not an overnight thing and it’s not a direct link.

“My experience is you don’t want a student who has lived in Indiana his or her whole life – let them go see the world and then bring them back.”

INFORMATION LINK

Resources: Purdue University at www.purdue.edu

Anderson University at www.anderson.edu

Lumina Foundation for Education at www.luminafoundation.org

Indiana Commission for Higher Education at www.che.in.gov