



# TAKING ON THE 'NEW NORMAL'

## Ellspermann Seeks Strong 'Workforce Engine'

Sue Ellspermann, Ph.D., became the ninth president of Ivy Tech Community College, and the first female to hold that position, on July 1, 2016. That followed one term in the Indiana House and three-plus years as Indiana's lieutenant governor. She shares her insights in this one-on-one interview.

**BizVoice®: What did you learn during campus visits last summer before you officially started on the job?**

**Sue Ellspermann:** June was great, to visit more than 20 of Ivy Tech's locations across the state, to visit with over 700 faculty and staff in more than 50 meetings. It was important because as you come in to a new institution – I had an outside view, as lieutenant governor I had gotten to understand workforce – but to really understand what makes Ivy Tech tick, to understand what is important to faculty and staff, how we serve our students, who our students are is very, very important.

Those meetings really informed me about the commitment our faculty and staff

have to the work they do. As I left, I said this is more a vocation than a job. Because we really understand at Ivy Tech the students we are serving. There's a really special spirit about the people here at Ivy Tech.

**BV: If that was your internship, now you've had six months of on-the-job training. What are the biggest surprises?**

**SE:** There are so many. I would say that first 30 days (June) was also a little bit about drinking out of a fire hose, as was the early fall, first semester, seeing how all of our campuses work. Each serves their communities, the employers in that community, while being part of this bigger system. We are the largest singly

**By Tom Schuman**

accredited community college in the country and with that comes a fair amount of complexity.

Some of the things that we're working on is really about how do we take on what I call the "new normal." The cheese has moved. Back in the recession, we had so many students, they were knocking down our doors. We couldn't keep them away. We almost doubled in size. Now that we're at nearly full employment in Indiana, which is a great thing, it's challenging to have those same numbers of students come back because we **need** them to.

Indiana's employers really need those middle skills jobs that Ivy Tech provides. Understanding that it's not just hanging out your shingle and saying, "We have this welding program or this industrial maintenance program or this IT program and all those seats will be filled." We have a real challenge to recruit those students – both 18-year-olds and incumbent

workers to come back to school and get that credential or degree that will allow them to take that 50, 60, 80,000 dollar job that is out there.

**BV: On-time completion is a huge issue. What does it mean to you and how should it best be measured for Ivy Tech students?**

**SE:** I shared that 69% of our students are part-time, so that full-time student is probably not our main metric. It’s OK to track, and we should. We are beginning to track something called student’s expected time frame.

Let me give you an example. If you are one of our 5,300 apprentices, an apprenticeship typically takes five years. By definition (of on-time graduation), that’s a failure. And yet the apprenticeship programs, we all know in industry, are some of the best. They’re working, they’re gaining the skill and they’re gaining an associate degree – all with no debt. So if you think about the best of all worlds, that’s a great example.

Yes, we appreciate and support what the higher ed commission and the state are pursuing with those graduation rates. We want all of our students to proceed at the fastest rate they can, but we want to know when they walk in the door, what is their expected time frame. I often share that it took me eight years to do a master’s and Ph.D. If I could have gone full time, I could have done it in four years.

But I had my own full-time business, I had a child and I had a second baby on spring break one year. So eight years was all right. It was the right thing for me and it was successful. My Ph.D. was no less valuable than had I completed it in four years. That’s the understanding we want to be sensitive to, but we always want to help people move as quickly as they can.

**BV: Knowing which students are on the right (or wrong) track is so essential. How is your data system working to provide that critical information in a timely manner?**

**SE:** I’m now convinced Ivy Tech has the best data warehouse in the country. We’re able to take many of these separate systems and feed this information in so we can look at these variables in

real time. We call that system NEWT – that new thing. We know within two weeks, with 81% accuracy, whether one of our students will succeed or fail. That’s very important information, but it’s only good if you act on it.

In two weeks, we knew that 16,000 of our students were at risk of failing. So we had advisors, faculty, staff reaching out to each and every one of those students during the next two-week period with the hope of understanding what their challenges were. It was everything from the bookstore to one of our students who had no food. We do serve an at-risk population. We were able to help many of those students. Some of them, they overwhelmingly appreciated the call.

We didn’t say, “You’re failing.” We said, “Can we help? Is there anything we can do? How are you doing?” So in mid-terms, we tracked how they were doing. We improved our pass rates at midterms by 3.3%, the biggest one-time bump we’ve ever seen at that point for any given intervention. We called that project Early Success.

We’ll continue to use that, but it shows you that when you have real time data and you actually use it to help that student, you can change the trajectory. It is one of many examples we hope to use – we believe it can help us be both high-tech and high-touch – because our students do have in many cases a more challenging environment than their four-year peers.

**VIDEO BONUS:  
Ivy Tech role in  
the community**



**BV: Alignment of education and workforce development. Everyone wants to do it well, but many struggle to succeed. What does our state do well and where are the biggest gaps?**

**SE:** I would say this is one time where the stars have aligned in Indiana. We have a General Assembly that last year gave Ivy Tech its own bill, which required us to have a vice president of workforce which would be focused on that alignment with our employers and we’ve done that. We have aligned a whole part of Ivy Tech to make sure that is happening, including the development of tools to help ensure we are using data provided by the Department of Workforce Development. So we know what those top five jobs are in each of our five industry sectors –



Before her official start date last July, Sue Ellspermann traveled to Ivy Tech locations around the state for a first-hand look at campuses and programs.

manufacturing, health sciences, IT, logistics and agriculture.

If you have listened to Gov. Holcomb, he's absolutely as equally committed to workforce, his wanting Indiana to be a magnet for jobs. For my years around higher ed and the state, this is really the first time I have heard such a consensus and a commitment to working forward.

I think we have a lot to do, but I think Indiana is ahead of the game. Ivy Tech, I call us the 12-cylinder workforce engine for Indiana; it's critical that we be leading by example, putting these tools in place to make this alignment happen.

**BV: 12 cylinders; that sounds pretty powerful?**

**SE:** That's a great engine. That would be a great car. Wouldn't you have wanted that when you were 16 years old?

**BV: What are some of the other ways Ivy Tech's role is evolving to help meet the skill needs of Indiana employers?**

**SE:** That student who is 30, 40 years old – making Ivy Tech easier for that student to come back to. Whether that's things like block scheduling, co-requisites that help that student get the kind of support if they didn't come in quite college ready, doing a lot around making that experience easier.

Second is really around the workforce alignment. Before we approve any kind of capital request going forward it has to line up, be tested against workforce demand so that we're making the right investments. Honestly, I think we'll be divesting of some of that 6.6 million square feet we have across the state of Indiana.

I'm an industrial engineer. We're going to have the buildings we need. We're not trying to build large campuses. ... We want to meet exactly the need that our employers have. That ability to be agile is going to be really a hallmark that we'll be building upon and see how we can do that in a way that serves Indiana well into the future.

**BV: I read where you were in the classroom a few months ago in Terre Haute as a guest instructor. How enjoyable was that and would you like to do more?**

**SE:** It's very purposeful. We did 12 of them. I'm being scheduled for 12 more this spring. It's so I can get to know our students. That IVYT class, that introductory 100 level, one credit hour class, you

**VIDEO BONUS: Spare time for Ellspermann?**



Ellspermann has been a vocal supporter of experiential learning opportunities, including those through Indiana INTERNnet and its IMPACT Awards.



might think about it as a college success class, career development class. I come in and I speak about workforce development and the jobs that are out there.

I can be a voice for all of Indiana and regionally. I test them a little bit. Have you thought about whether there are jobs on the other end of careers you are pursuing? They then have to write for me a paper that demonstrates, by data, that there is demand. I show them how to go look for that. Whether it is a living wage, what their challenges are going to be and what they will define as success. I know everybody doesn't define income as success, so I want to hear, "Why are you doing this?"

Then in that class, I do a little bit of a focus group with them so I can learn about what we're doing well and what we might change. I ask: "How many of you have a job?" Well, virtually all have a job and most of them full-time jobs. I ask, "How many of you have children?" More than a third of the hands go

up. That is not a traditional college campus.

When I ask them, "What are the things you hope Ivy Tech would consider doing," things like day care, transportation challenges come up. Technology, having a tablet or some kind of technology to work with. Those are things I hear from them that help me to be calibrated with the student we have, not the one I remember being. As you travel the state, you get a tremendous understanding of the challenges they have in meeting their goals. I would love to bring employers into that experience. For me, it helps make sure I know who we're serving.

**BV: Sounds like a great day?**

**SE:** I then have to read all those papers. I commit to giving them all feedback. I don't grade them, but I give them feedback about do I agree with where they're going, are there some other things they might be thinking about. ... Now I have ongoing relationships with any number of those students who have real exciting careers planned. And if there's a way I or we can help, like hooking them up with an employer that might offer them an internship. There are many opportunities those meetings offer.





As lieutenant governor, Ellspermann outlined a Blue Ribbon Panel on Transportation Infrastructure report at the Indiana Chamber in 2014.

I hope that they keep me on the right track as we go forward.

**BV: How much are you enjoying this role?**

**SE:** Absolutely more so than I imagined in that you get to be around – granted, we’re nontraditional but we’re still young. Our average student is about 27 years old. But it’s still a young place and it’s a place where people have big dreams. So whether it’s in the classroom or working with our programs where we’re launching new things or working with employers. I’m a creative problem solver.

I look at this place and the complex challenge we have before us. I know the talent that we have in the organization and it’s a very exciting time. We’re going into strategic planning as we speak; it will be about a yearlong endeavor, bringing hundreds of our people together,

faculty and staff. We’re building something together. That’s what’s really fun and exciting for me, building this plan that will transform one of the nation’s largest community colleges into being the best community college in the nation.

**BV: Final question: Can you share an anecdote, something that has touched you, from a paper you have read or a visit you have made?**

**SE:** I met a student from southeast Indiana who had been a heroin addict much of her life. And she had come from a family that had actually helped her become addicted when she was young. She’s not my age, but she isn’t far off. She got clean a few years ago. Her husband overdosed; they were able to bring him back. That’s when she decided she was coming back (to school) and she was going to be part of the solution.

I met her at one of these IVYT classes. She shared her story. She sent me not only her paper, but the paper she had written in one of her classes about the addiction services she hopes to offer some day. I was totally inspired. I will stay in touch with her. We’ll support her every way we can. But that’s someone who is coming back at a time in her life when she actually has grandchildren, and she’s here because she knows there’s something bigger she wants to do.

Life may not have been easy for her, but she wants to take that experience and use it in a way that she believes few can unless you’ve been there like she has. She has the chance to really build programs that will help others, and we know addiction services are unfortunately in very high demand across Indiana and much of the country. Here we have someone who I believe will really be part of that solution. I’m so proud when you meet people like that that just know their purpose, and we’re part of helping them achieve that.

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