



Dr. Thomas A. Kazez: Writing a New Educational Chapter

The Kazezes gaze upon Evansville as they arrive for his April hiring announcement.

“

I remember a former college president once saying to me that being college president was the best job in the world. ... I'm beginning to get a sense of what he meant by that,” declares Dr. Thomas A. Kazez, who was selected as top administrator at the University of Evansville (UE) in April and arrived for work in June.

“It can be tremendously rewarding to see what happens in places like this. And as a president, you have a chance to make these institutions even stronger.”

Immediately prior to coming to Indiana, Kazez served as the provost and executive vice president at Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina. For one year, he was also the school's acting president.

BizVoice: What appealed to you about the University of Evansville?

Thomas Kazez: “It’s in a community of almost the same size of Greenville, and we enjoyed living there. When we made a number of visits to Evansville and to the campus, my wife (Sharon) and I were immediately charmed by it.

“But that’s only part of the picture; the institute itself matters a great deal. Furman and Evansville are rather similar institutions in many ways. Both are highly respected institutions with quality faculty and almost exactly the same size. The core character of both is similar – a commitment to liberal education, to all of those things that small colleges can offer such as small classes and dedicated faculty.

“And the more people I met in Evansville, the more clear it was to me that this is an institution whose values are very similar to my own. That was at a foundational level very important to me – that I would be moving into an environment that not only I had a degree of familiarity with but excitement about.

“Then the third piece of that puzzle is what potential exists at an institution for building on that foundation of strength to become an even greater place. And that’s something that one gets a feel for through extensive conversations with the board of trustees, people in the community, the faculty and the students. I made a point while here to initiate conversations, not just with those folks who were part of the search process, but by just walking up to folks and saying, ‘I’m visiting, tell me about the University of Evansville.’ My excitement about the possibilities grew with each of the conversations.

By Rebecca Patrick

“So many of my conversations ended with what anyone considering a college presidency most

wants to hear: 'Great to meet you. Tell us what we can do to help.' When I heard that – and I heard it many times – it became clear to me that this is a place with tremendous potential for becoming an even stronger institution.

“Put all three of those elements together, and it just was a compelling opportunity that we decided to take.”

BV: In your very brief time at UE (six weeks at the time of the interview), how have you found the school to be?

TK: “At UE, people were very candid and very honest about both their concerns about the institution and their aspirations for it, so I’ve been pleasantly surprised at the absence of surprises. The picture of the institution that emerged from the search process has turned out to be really quite an accurate one; that’s very good.

“And I’m just having a blast – largely because this is an area of activity that I love. I love being part of an academic environment, but also because folks here are so proud of the University of Evansville and are anxious for it to do well, so those meetings have been very positive. Now, that said, the challenge is to put all of the pieces together. ... With each conversation I learn a little bit more and am putting those pieces together so the picture that emerges is a more coherent one.”

BV: What are your goals for UE ... what areas do you want to strengthen?

TK: “Building our resource base; our endowment is substantial – about \$75 million – and it’s an endowment that many institutions would certainly be envious of, but frankly it needs to grow given our ambitions and what we want to accomplish. We need to have a large endowment, and one of my tasks will be to work on that. I will be spending a lot of time on the road, traveling and talking with people about what we do at UE.

“We also need to address what is a particular kind of challenge for institutions grounded in the liberal arts or in liberal education, and that is to make a compelling argument for the value of a liberal education today. I’m strongly convinced – I’ve spent 30 years at these kinds of institutions – that especially given the current economic anxiety, there is no better education in the world than the education a student can get at an institution like the University of Evansville. Those time-tested strengths of liberal education – the ability to think critically, the understanding of the world more broadly, the ability to write, the ability to speak – those are the skills that are not profession-specific; those are skills that are relevant for every kind of vocational or career opportunity.

“We need to make that argument more convincingly ... your ability to be agile in this marketplace is greater (with a liberal education) than if you had a narrower education. So we need to shape that message in a way that folks see that value in coming to a place like the University of Evansville.



Students, faculty, administrators and media welcome the university's 23rd president.

“The third goal is to extend our existing commitment to global awareness and to international understanding. We have a remarkable program at Harlaxton College (UE’s British campus). Many of our students study there, but we need to do more of that kind of thing. I’m especially anxious for us to develop a presence in Asia and perhaps in China specifically, where so much of what’s happening in the world is centered these days. Our school of business has a very specific focus on global enterprise (the Institute for Global Enterprise in Indiana).”

BV: During your 18-year tenure at Davidson College, you received a prestigious honor – the Hunter-Hamilton Love of Teaching Award. What did that mean to you?

TK: “When they said my name (at commencement, where the award is announced), I literally almost fell out of my seat – I had no idea it was coming. It’s a very meaningful award and speaks to what has been my life’s work.

“The award is given largely on the nominations made by alums, and I think that’s important; it’s not the result of current students saying you’re a good teacher. Those awards are marvelous, but it’s an award based on a more reflective and more experienced perception of students who have gone on into their lives and looked back on the faculty that they’ve known and said Professor Whoever-That-Might-Be was instrumental in shaping my life. To have them say that I was in that group was humbling; that really was a moving moment in my life. Of all the ‘thank you for all that you’ve done’ things over the years, this has been the most significant.”

BV: What sparked your shift from professor to full-fledged administrator?

TK: “I had increasingly become involved at Davidson in administrative matters – and not just as the chair of the political science department but also working with the various committees that help to shape the strategic direction of the college. And I developed a bit of an appetite for it and some experience in it. Others suggested I consider moving in to that arena on a more



The Kazees – grand marshals of the local "End Hunger" walk – look to become active in the community.

full-time basis. However, when some folks who were on the faculty at Davidson talked to me about the possibility of applying for the Dean of the College position at the University of the South (in Sewanee, Tennessee), I initially was still reluctant.

"If you talk to any professor, I think they will – only half-jokingly – talk about crossing over to the dark side, becoming an administrator. But ultimately I thought it was probably time for me to test my skills in that arena. I had spent a fair amount of time, as all faculty members do, observing and sometimes critiquing the decisions that administrators made. This was a chance for me to try my hand at that.

"That position (leading the academic program at the University

of the South) was really pretty important in terms of my getting a sense of whether this is the kind of work that I would want to spend the rest of my life doing."

BV: How does your lifelong career as a professor influence you now as a university president?

TK: "Institutions like this are about learning and about teaching. That's something that I absolutely love to do, to go into that classroom and close the door behind me and know for the next hour or so we are going to have an opportunity to learn together. (In prior administrator positions, Kazez continued to teach a course each year and said he would do so at Evansville if his schedule permits.)

"As an administrator, when I talk to faculty members, my job is to enable them to do that kind of work. We need to create an environment in which faculty (members) can realize their full potential and can really transform the lives of their students. If I've done my job well, I'm facilitating them being outstanding teachers. And to me that's what it's all about – it's all about the students, it's all about creating environments where learning can take place most effectively. That ought to be the measure of any senior administrator."

INFORMATION LINK
Resource: University of Evansville at www.evansville.edu

Congratulations, Dr. Thomas A. Kazez, on your presidential inauguration.

Dr. Kazez,

Welcome to the community! As your fellow University of Evansville Board members, we congratulate you on your presidential inauguration and look forward to supporting your vision for the University of Evansville.

With best wishes,

Alan W. Braun	Robert G. Jones
Larry E. Dunigan	Marjorie Z. Soyugenc
Niel C. Ellerbrook	Linda E. White
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