

Beverley Pitts: Exiting the Stage With High Marks



By Tom Schuman

Beverley Pitts came to the University of Indianapolis, then commonly known as U of I, in 2005 as the institution's eighth president after a distinguished teaching and administrative career at Anderson and Ball State universities. She leaves seven years later, at the end of this academic year, having transformed UIndy not only in its official nickname but in so many ways on campus and in its ties to its home city.

BizVoice®: What are you most proud of?

Beverley Pitts: "I guess I would say two things. One is the facilities change because that makes a dramatic effect in terms of what the public sees and making the campus attractive to students." Included in that has been "doubling the size of the student center, building a second new residence hall (ground broken on Roberts Hall last fall) and the athletic and recreation center, which turned out to be a (much more expansive) project than we thought it would be. I think those physical changes to campus, creating a more social environment for students, are one of the things we really needed.

Beverley Pitts chats with students along the university's Smith Mall.



"Then there is our reputation for quality programming (citing CELL, the Center for Excellence in Leadership of Learning, as one example) and reaching out to the community. It's been taking the Indianapolis name really seriously and making UIndy more connected to the community."

BV: Talk a little about those ties to community, especially when the university shares a name with the city it calls home.

BP: "There's a respect for the name and a sense of obligation with our university's name – we're talking about our city. Certainly we serve students from all over the country so in a lot of ways we're introducing the city to people all over the country. Also, we live and work right here in the city, and we're very much a part of this community's success.

"I've used this phrase many times: 100 years from now, this university will still be sitting here. It's very important that the community around it is strong, and we feel an obligation to make that happen. There's an obligatory and kind of mission-based sense in which we are committed to this community. Today, in higher education, if

you don't have a commitment beyond just educating kids, then you are not going to stay in business very long."

BV: How about the day in March 2011 when you had the five most recent Indianapolis mayors together for a panel discussion. What do you recall most from that evening?

BP: "The experience itself was beyond our wildest dreams. I knew it would be cordial and I knew it would be interesting, but I didn't really think that it would get as in-depth as it did – that the conversation would be as rich about how the city got where it did; the lessons about how mayors built on each other's work; and the sense of collaborativeness and common goal was so touching because of the environment we're in. The political environment is so hostile. It was really great to see true civic leaders rise to the occasion and have that rich, rich conversation. It was a great, great beginning point for the Institute."

BV: What does the Institute for Civic Leadership & Mayoral Archives mean for the university?

BP: "Everybody benefits. This is one of those win-wins. We envision the Institute being a gathering place and instigator of common ground about the city, its history and, in particular, where it's going. The archives really serve as the repository for the story of Indianapolis, and we want to continue that. This will be a place in Indianapolis where the story of the modern city will be told. We hope that researchers from all over the country will come."

"We hope we will be able to have programming for elementary, middle school and high school kids about civic leadership and what it means to be engaged in your city – both the government side but also what business partnerships can do. This is the place where those conversations can take place and where that can be kept alive and enriched. For our own students, it means more opportunities, and we are looking at, for example, what we can do to create opportunities for our graduate students in history and political science."

BV: Retention and ultimately graduation are a near universal focus in higher education today. Have you been pleased with UIIndy's progress in these areas?

BP: "One of the things we have been very encouraged about is our retention rate. It has actually gone up by five or six percentage points over the last several years. We're up in the high 70s now; we have a goal of 80%. That's a good goal for us. It's a

goal that I think is realistic in that we're still building opportunities for students that financially may not be able to go to school. We have a program that captures students from the beginning, their freshman year.

"The other big issue on retention is financial aid. We've worked very hard to keep our tuition very low for a private school and to add a lot of money into financial aid. (In the economic downturn of 2008-2009, \$3 million in salary increases were put on hold with the money utilized for additional financial aid). We're in the lower fourth (in tuition) of private schools in Indiana.

"That's hard to do and maintain the quality. We think we're keeping the door open for a lot of students to stay in school. For private schools especially, the retention issue is making sure that academically they're capable and they're engaged and want to be here. But the other thing is, can we, semester by semester by semester, see that they have the financial aid to do it."

BV: Are these challenges today different than they were in the past?

BP: "Retention has always been an issue for higher education. I'm not making excuses, but the retention data people look at is basically cohort data – it doesn't count transfer students. So we're really doing a little better in the state overall than it might appear. We're working very hard with Ivy Tech to get kids to start there. That's been around a long time, but it's so much more intense now for several reasons. One is that your options are basically almost closed if you don't get at least an associate's degree. The job market requires it. That wasn't the case 25 years ago."

BV: Arts and culture are an important part of this university. Why such an emphasis in these areas?

BP: "Universities are kind of the gathering places for communities. We're so proud of the (Christel) DeHaan (Fine Arts) Center, obviously. It's a beautiful performance hall. We're very, very proud of our jazz program, the best in the state I think. We attract wonderful students and wonderful performers. We have events at DeHaan nearly every night of the year and most are free. We also have the visual arts, which are very strong here, the graphic arts, theater. We're very pleased that Raymond Leppard (music director of the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra for 14 years) is still an artist-in-residence, and we have a wonderful performance every fall with him."

"I sent a note to Christel a few years ago and it really is true ... if





The Christel DeHaan Fine Arts Center serves as a cultural hub for the university and the community.

you build it, they will come. Other artists from all over the state and country are here on a regular basis. Our students are out in the community too. We're very proud of the arts side of the university and sometimes you have to remind people it's here."

BV: You participated in a BizVoice® roundtable discussion shortly after starting at UIndy with the emphasis on the changing role of the university president and the job of communicating your mission. How has your journalism background helped in that regard?

BP: "I would almost say it's the best preparation you can have to be a college president, but I'm sure the presidents who come from business or English or history would say the same for their fields. But a president is kind of the voice of the institution and sets the agenda for what stories are going to be told.

"Faculty say, 'We'll just do our good work and people will notice.' But, in truth, this is a world in which you have to remind people. That's been a big part of the work I've done. We branded UIndy back in 2006 with the idea that we needed to help distinguish ourselves. People got us confused with IUPUI, still do sometimes; with IU; with the University of Illinois; only we can be UIndy. The story, engagement in education, is huge."

Pitts mentions CELL, the university's Center on Community & Aging, the largest physical therapy doctoral program in the state as a few examples, noting, "You find those sound bites and people say, 'Oh, I didn't know that and then they remember a little bit.'"

"But probably landing in our laps was the best story, which was becoming the host (practice site) for the NFC Super Bowl team."

A new recreation center was in the works at UIndy. When the original Super Bowl plans to build a dome facility at Indianapolis Tech High School proved too expensive, the university was able to enhance its plans, with assistance from the local planning committee.

"The legacy projects (on the east side of the city) got done and the turf in our dome will go to Tech High School," Pitts explains. "We will put in field turf and have a full-size NCAA track and indoor recreation facility. Now (in mid-January), we're enjoying the preparation. We've had more

than 6,000 people in there, mostly kids from Boys and Girls Clubs."

BV: The Super Bowl is not your first experience with the NFL, having worked a number of years with the league's Players Association. How did that come about?

Pitts begins her answer by describing that she recently found some old notes from several press conferences in the 1980s in preparation for giving a provost's lecture titled, "What I Learned From Football."

BP: "My journalism work had been relatively limited. I had done a little bit of work for the newspaper and done some freelance work. I was a journalism teacher, but I really wanted to work in a national media environment. I asked for a sabbatical and contacted everyone I knew – in Washington, New York, Los Angeles.

"An old friend, Frank Woschitz, was the public relations director for the NFLPA. I asked Frank, 'Would you take me for a year to work there, kind of an intern.' So that's how I ended up going. I got to do a lot of interesting things. I worked a year, went back and worked for them two summers after that and then stayed as a consultant for 20-some years. That goes from 1985 to 2005.

BV: We talked about retention and graduation. Is that the biggest challenge in the higher education landscape?

BP: "Well, certainly graduation rates is one of them. I'm going to be working with (Indiana Higher Education) Commissioner (Teresa) Lubbers on a committee. But there's a bigger one hanging out there ... and that is preparation for post high school education. (There won't be improvement) until we get the group of students ready who now aren't even eligible to go to college and don't always see the route to it or even understand how it works. Of course, everybody is working so hard on it.

"I actually think we're close to that; there is enough interest



The Athletics & Recreation Center, the practice site for the New York Giants during Super Bowl week, is a much-needed facility for UIndy teams and youth activities.



Pitts was one of three honorees in November 2011 at the Lt. Governor's Leadership Luncheon presented by the Girl Scouts of Central Indiana.

from the business community, higher education, educators, politicians. The problem is everybody thinks they know the answer; if it was that easy, we would have done it a long time ago. Those of us who are professional educators and have been working on the issue all our careers, we have the recognition of how complex it is. Higher education has got to play its role. We certainly want to get the kids educated that come to us, but in truth we don't do a bad job at that. For the kids that come to college, they get some education, most of them graduate over time, we now have adult education programs for them to come back to. That piece of it is chugging along, but what really concerns me is who we're not getting."

BV: What are you going to miss the most?

BP: "I have used this phrase as well, but it is so appropriate here:

watching 18-year-olds turn into 22-year-olds. I will miss that. There is a great joy in the freshness and exhilaration and say immaturity of the 18-year-old who comes to college and knowing that you are providing an environment in which that young person is going to change his or her life. Then seeing them at graduation, ready and mature, not ready to conquer everything in life but with some of the tools that are going to take them in the right direction, is one of the most satisfying things in the world.

"The other thing is the seasonal nature; I've been in school all my life. I probably will find ways to still engage in that. There is a fresh new beginning every fall that really gets you encouraged and excited. And colleagues, the environment of a university that is so rich in intellectual capital. There are so many talented people ... I will miss that."

BV: What are you most looking forward to?

BP: "Obviously travel. We've always traveled a lot because of the university environment. I'll be going to Athens (where the university operates a campus) for a fifth or sixth trip in June. I'm Swedish. I'd like to go back to that area of the world. Also, going back and seeing what I can do with my communications skills. I'm not going to go out and write a book; there are enough of those. I will stay engaged with this community, especially in the K-12 initiatives."

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whatever the race.*

Dennis Reinbold

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