

This roundtable discussion took place on January 13, 12 days before the unexpected departure of Paul Ferguson as president at Ball State University. Nevertheless, selected comments based on his many years of experience in higher education provide valuable insights and are included in this article.

STATE OF EDUCATION

University Leaders Offer Impressions

By Rebecca Patrick

There's talk on the street; it sounds so familiar

Great expectations; everybody's watching you

The lyrics from the Eagles classic hit, "New Kid in Town," poetically sum up the challenge – albeit exciting in many ways – for today's higher education leaders.

Four lifelong educators, all who came to their positions less than three years ago, joined us in mid-January to provide their thoughts on the current collegiate landscape:

- Kathryn Cruz-Uribe, chancellor, Indiana University East, at www.iue.edu
- Paul Ferguson, immediate past president, Ball State University (this roundtable was held less than two weeks before his announced resignation), at www.bsu.edu
- Gregory Hess, president, Wabash College, at www.wabash.edu
- David Wright, president, Indiana Wesleyan University, at www.indwes.edu

Seeking the students

Competition for students is obviously fierce; the trick, says the panel, is to define one's niche.

"We are going after all the same students, but I think we have to fully be honest to say I'm not coming up with an engineering program, I'm not going to get into that sphere. If it is telecommunications, I am in play. You know, if it is fine arts, I am in play," Ferguson explains.

"And really you can have multiple programs, but I think you have to really define your niche honestly and appropriately within Indiana's higher education. ... It is up to us when we go looking for funding to make sure that is defined. ... I think it's been healthy in my experience."

He notes efforts in his first year to establish Ball State as an entrepreneurial university.

Cruz-Uribe first emphasizes there is not competition among the

IU schools. "The way the regional campuses are set up within IU is we each have a defined service area; so (instead) we are very close collaborators. It is a way to build our own strength and see what things we might be able to offer across our campuses that maybe any one individual campus can't do.

"But that being said, it is a very competitive (overall) landscape. In our town of Richmond, for example, we have IU East, the small private Earlham College, Purdue Polytechnic and Ivy Tech, so we actually have a lot of educational opportunities in quite a smallish town."

Wabash's size presents another layer to the situation.

"We are a small institution – which we think is one of our greatest strengths – but it is not the economic model that most people look for. You know, there is still only one president here and I only have 900 students; I don't have 9,000 or 19,000 students, so some of those fixed costs are a little bit harder to spread around," Hess shares.

Managing the expectations

With the inherent competition comes unique pressures for those at the top.

"The challenges of leadership in higher education are evolving daily," Ferguson asserts. "Leading a major public research university of 20,000-plus, 106,000 alumni, you really want this institution to be relevant and impactful. You want the vision to be real; you want your constituencies to own that, to believe in it and to be partners in moving the institution forward to really prepare students for their future careers to impact your community.

"And the challenge of that leadership is becoming more and more acute with the environment we live in, social media we live in; the constituencies are so diverse and have strong or deep opinions.

"The challenge of doing that in a micromanagement moment is the challenge of being president in 2016," Ferguson stresses. "You want to lead by consensus, you can't lead by unanimity, but you are always attempting to bridge the gap between so many diverse opinions under a momentary change of notice."

Wright likens the job more to being a mayor than a CEO because of the many varied interest groups within a university.

"They are all groups of people who have strong opinions and are

well-educated and develop a sense of conviction. So we don't get ahead by just ordering people around; we have to initiate conversations and dialogue that lead somewhere."

He pinpoints the challenge further.

"We are in an environment where the universities less and less can afford to simply be these diffuse organizations whose existence is unquestioned and their trajectory, their vision and their direction is really kind of unexamined. We just exist because we are an important part of the landscape.

"We can't do that anymore, we have to be more focused and relevant – clear about why we exist and what our niches are that we serve – how we serve students better and different," Wright believes.

"To do that with a big organization that is all sprawled out is very, very hard. It is hard to bring focus and direction in that kind of a setting and so for me the challenge has been: How do you learn to lead at scale? How do you learn to direct an organization that isn't all that interested in me just telling them what to do? So that's the personal challenge, I think, of leadership."

But the ultimate test, he contends, is "how to produce common good for society and how do we marshal the resources of these wonderful populations we work with – faculty



"We started a tradition at Ball State where we have graduates at commencement who come with their mentors. We have them at the Bracken House and every time they walk through the door, I ask: 'Why is this mentor important to you?' "

– Paul Ferguson

and staff and board members and trustees, and then nurture the students so that at the end of the day there is greater social good because we existed.

"There is nothing more meaningful for me than to contribute to that cause, but it also means it is hard to measure; it is hard to know when you are succeeding and when you are not quite succeeding. It is hard to get people to even agree on what the social good is that we are after – let alone how to get there. So it is a fascinating job, the best job I ever had and also the hardest job I ever had."

Hess offers that he's "usually in a pretty good mood" by day's end. "There are parts in the middle of the day where it can get a little spicy, but at the end of the day we are doing great things.

"We are educating people, making them better to serve their own personal interests and the interests of our state and nation. That being said, we always have to get better and that's the first thing I try to think about every morning."

The impact of education is also what makes Cruz-Urbe eager to tackle each day.

"I am always struck when I meet our alums, and they just spontaneously will tell me the stories about how their education, their experiences at IU East, changed their lives and changed the trajectory of their families."

Deliberate intentions

To have that desired effect, it starts with retaining students – which ultimately goes hand-in-hand with graduation. Wright says he's learned the value of truly working on retention.

"Retention doesn't happen if you don't dedicate people to it with ideas that track students and intervene with students at their points of vulnerability," he declares.

"About six years ago when I was provost, I said we are really going to work on retention and we put some people in place. I had to fight for the funding for that, and for the first two or three years we saw no change in the rate. I thought I spent a lot of money, went through a lot of political capital to get this in place and it is not going to make a difference. But then it just took off. And it is a reminder that retention is really about people; it is about individuals; it is every single student."

Indiana Wesleyan's numbers back up the success of the effort. According to Wright, "our four-year graduation rate is about 64%,



"One of the things that Indiana University has put a big effort into is financial literacy for students. ... They have a web site called Money Smarts; they have a debt monster. It's coming from students so students can relate to the things that they are saying."

– Kathryn Cruz-Urbe

our six-year graduation rate is just over 70% and with selected students (nursing, for example) it is approaching 90%."

Meanwhile, Wabash College puts a unique emphasis on experiential learning experiences.

"We send – based just purely on fundraising – about a third of all students by the time they graduate on what we call immersion learning trips. That's where the faculty member goes with the students and their class (average class size is 13) on a trip together," Hess begins.

"It might be to Cincinnati to visit an Underground Railroad museum or a bigger trip. We had a literature class that over Thanksgiving break went to South Africa, met with everyone from (social activist and famed apartheid opponent) Desmond Tutu to writers. So we have creative ways to integrate those aspects into our coursework."

Online combination

Two of those in the discussion – IU East and Indiana Wesleyan – are helping lead the way in the state with their online education efforts. And both believe there are some myths to dispel.

"I don't personally believe that online learning or technology-mediated learning will ever replace a face-to-face learning experience. In fact, we think of ourselves as a learning community and the modalities are just ways that we usher people into our learning community," Wright explains.

"They get entry to us by coming to our campus, many of them, but they get entry to our community as well through the online interface. So I think it is really a mistake to

lose sight of the educating and to think that in some way technology replaces that community because it never does.”

Cruz-Urbe agrees and says it’s not inexpensive to create a meaningful online experience.

“It requires a lot of investment in course design and thinking about how to make it interactive. We made a big splash about (tennis great) Venus Williams graduating from IU East; she was an online student and she came to campus in the fall to receive her degree.

“But one of the things that we organized for her was bringing together students who she had been in a lot of classes with, and it was great because they knew her online and she knew them; they had created that online community. But then to meet them and her faculty face-to-face was pretty exciting.”

Interjects Wright: “We are educated by other people, by interaction with other people; the technologies are only a means to that end. What I see is an increasing desire to tailor learning programs to individuals ... so you see

these conference-based learning approaches, you see adaptive learning approaches that try to use the best of technology to tailor the learning experience to the learning style and the learning goals and the needs of a particular student.”

Ferguson also mentions the “(personal) touch and technology” both needing to be present.

“That’s where I think online education will continue to be successful.”

Ball State, he notes, “has made a strong commitment to online education over the last five to six years” – with certain degrees available online.

STEM and liberal arts

The institutions are also responding to the well-documented needs in the science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) sectors. Schools focused on a liberal arts education are and have been looking at what can be done to potentially combine with STEM efforts to bring value to future workers.

At Wabash College, that fusion is



“I think we are going to see pressure from the marketplace to desegregate our degrees so that the focus comes to be on competency and gaining some kind of credential that the marketplace, the business community, recognizes. For some, the question now isn’t so much do you have a degree, but do you have the set of competencies that I need you to have to come work for me.”

– David Wright

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integrated at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

“We have tried to bring in a lot more technical opportunities for students. We have a fair number of students who major in mathematics; I think it is one of the second or third highest majors in (our) college and we have a lot that have an interest in medicine, so we do have a pretty robust presence there,” Hess offers.

“We also have created connections with the ESTEEM program at Notre Dame. It is a one-year master’s degree for students who have an interest in the E in ESTEEM, which is entrepreneurship. So a lot of our students, who are interested in science and business as well, have moved into those types of programs.

“We continue conversations with the IU School of Informatics to think about some connections there. And I don’t know how many private institutions in Indiana have a 3-2 program with Purdue in engineering like we do (a 3-2 program involves dual degrees in liberal arts and engineering at the respective schools). That (3-2 program) has been in the works for about five years, and we started to have some successful graduates there,” Hess states.

IU East has a branch of Purdue Polytechnic on its campus. There are students in the

general education track that end up graduating from Purdue with those STEM-related degrees.

At Ball State, Ferguson says the term has transformed to STEAM, to include the arts.

“We have coupled our liberal arts and sciences together in how students build those soft skills. ... I think in this day and age STEM alone is not the whole story,” he remarks.

Wright sees a natural marriage between the two fields of study.

“Part of liberal learning is about critical inquiry skills; it is about careful communication skills with writing and speech; it is about having a sense of a culture and a society, and those are skills that are foundational for the science and technology and medical field, engineering field. So I think that’s actually a great foundation for STEM.”

An initiative at Indiana Wesleyan’s residential campus in Marion is also looking to help those potential students far down the road.

“For the last five years, we have reached out into the community to engage youngsters at a very early age in science subjects and engineering subjects, physics subjects,” Wright describes.

“It is very, very gratifying to me to see and help younger people understand early on that they need not be mystified by these



“Young men are not doing as well in college as young women are. Women and men face different constraints, different obstacles in their own kind of journeys and paths. .. I think that will continue to be an emerging issue both within our college, the state and the nation.”

– Gregory Hess

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disciplines; and, in fact, they really are just an extension of the kind of learning we want all of our students to receive.”

A few of their favorite things

When it comes to what puts smiles on their faces, it’s no surprise that the leaders point to the people they encounter every day.

“The interaction that I get to have with students – either that come into the office for just conversation, or every once in a while I get to do a guest lecture in toxicology,” Ferguson remarks. “But I think it’s to get out of the role of president and interact with (the students) as a mentor or a friend.”

Wright first points to the staff. “To have a faculty member, a young faculty member walk me through their latest research project and see the passion and the light that’s in their eyes when they are pursuing that thing that’s of interest to them and to see the enormous talent that’s in that person, and to interact with the students and see the talent of the students – that’s the most rewarding thing for me.”

Adds Cruz-Uribe, “We say IU East is like a family, a functional family I like to say. It is so interesting to meet people who spontaneously will say that back to me, because I came up with that after reflecting what I heard, and I

still continue to hear it on campus.”

Alumni continue to strike a chord with Hess. “I meet with alums and I ask them: ‘Can you tell me about a faculty member who changed your life? Who is your favorite faculty member at Wabash College?’

“And the stories they tell – the intersection of their lives – how they have stayed in touch with them through the years, through the ups and downs in their lives and also the friendships that they formed here at the college – those are the stories that inspire me all the time.”

Key business connection

Each panelist spoke about the need for a reciprocal relationship with the business community, particularly those local to their areas.

Cruz-Uribe feels “we are all moving in that direction.” She cites IU East’s relationship with Reid Hospital, the largest employer in Richmond.

“We work with them to make sure that we have developed a family nurse practitioner track in our master’s degree in nursing, because of their needs. So it is back and forth, and I think with internships, we are really appreciating working with local businesses so that they understand what our students need to get out of an internship.”

In that same vein, Ferguson says that Ball State is “extremely appreciative” of employers being part of the process much earlier – “to talk about internships, to talk about co-ops, to talk about ways of getting our students into helping.

“The more we connect with opportunities for job fairs and career development, not just at the end of the pipeline, but what skill sets do you need, how do we adapt our curriculum to meet that. So we are seeing that partnership much earlier on and I think much more effectively.”

For Wright, he wants the business community to keep being the champion for higher education.

“One of the things that is important is for the business community to go on believing in the value of the kind of formal education that we can provide at our best. There is so much talk today about whether college and university education really is worth it,” he acknowledges.

“Not everybody probably does need the four-year college degree or master’s degree; but on the other hand, it really has been and often is the business community and the professional community who say we do value those skills. We value what happens to a student when they go through that formal atmosphere that lends legitimacy to the enterprise and raises the level of skill in our state and our region.”

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