

PRESIDENTIAL POWERS

NEW HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERS POSSESS DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS

BY TOM SCHUMAN



Are you tired of hearing about the best-selling book “The World is Flat,” growing economic powers in China and India, globalization and international competition?

If so, you’re in trouble. Those factors and more are here to stay. They are impacting businesses, workers, communities and societies. Higher education – through student interactions, faculty partnerships and other collaborations – has long been an international player.

While the new presidents of three of Indiana’s leading public higher education institutions boast many qualifications, it’s interesting to note that each brings a unique global perspective to their new job. They will rely on past experiences and look to create future partnerships as they work to help move Indiana forward.

Michael McRobbie, a native of Australia with international information technology expertise, officially assumes the presidential role at Indiana University on July 1. On that same date, Thomas Snyder becomes the president of Ivy Tech Community College. During a lengthy business career with General Motors and its affiliate companies, he helped start business operations in 12 countries, including Hungary, Poland and China.

France Córdova, taking over at Purdue on August 1, was born in Paris and lived in Germany as a child. Among her credentials: an award-winning author for a fictional book based on anthropologic field work in Oaxaca, Mexico, and “out of this world” experience as chief scientist for the National Aeronautic and Space Administration.

BizVoice® had the opportunity to sit down with both McRobbie and Snyder in separate, in-person interviews. Because the school year was still in progress at the University of California, Riverside, Córdova was only available for a brief one-on-one telephone conversation — one of the few interviews her very busy schedule allowed her to conduct with Indiana media since her selection.

Find out what they have to say about the challenges and opportunities that await them in their critical roles as higher education and state economic development leaders.



France Córdoba, Purdue University

University system: Five campuses, nearly 70,000 students

Leadership: France Córdoba, 11th president in 138-year history

Age: 59

University experience: 2002-2007, chancellor at University of California, Riverside; 1997-2002, vice chancellor for research and professor of physics at California, Santa Barbara; 1989-1993, head of the Department of Astronomy and Astrophysics at Penn State University

Background: The oldest of 12 children; born in Paris and spent a few years in Germany; worked a decade at the Los Alamos National Laboratory; was the youngest person to hold the position of NASA chief scientist, working on projects that included the Hubble Space Telescope; published more than 150 scientific papers and reports

Education: Bachelor's degree in English from Stanford University and doctorate in physics from the California Institute of Technology

Selected boards and committees: American Council on Education, National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges

France Córdoba receives a Purdue varsity jacket from Rachel Cumberbatch of Lebanon, a student board of trustees member, after the May 7 announcement of her selection as the 11th university president (*Purdue News Service photo/David Umberger*).

PURDUE UNIVERSITY FRANCE CÓRDOVA

BizVoice®: I read where Neil Armstrong walking on the moon was a career inspiration, but what attracted you to this position at Purdue at this time?

France Córdoba: "Purdue has an outstanding national reputation in science and engineering. It's a land grant university, so I think it is a great match for me – a scientist/engineer coming from UC Riverside, which is a land grant university within the UC (University of California) system. I also think it is a larger stage on which to be an advocate for the public's investment in higher education and a big opportunity for me to speak about access and success for students."

BV: You're following in some big footsteps in Martin Jischke. How much of an opportunity have you had to talk with him? How much do you expect to be able to utilize his expertise as you're making the transition?

FC: "Way before Purdue became interested in my candidacy, I thought that Martin Jischke was one of the nation's best university presidents. He has done spectacularly well with the founding of Discovery Park, the awarding of the new Mann Institute (\$100 million for commercializing biomedical technologies) and engaging (the state of) Indiana and Purdue's missions. Up until now I only had limited opportunities to talk with him, but he has generously offered to spend as much time as I would like to understand Purdue and its opportunities. I am looking forward to many fruitful talks with him."

BV: What are the biggest adjustments you will have to make in coming from California, Riverside to Purdue?

FC: "California has a large system of public and private universities that coordinate well together and offer a breadth of experiences for applicants to higher education. I will need to understand Indiana's array of higher education opportunities and how to maximize interactions with other institutions for the benefit of the state and students. That's one thing. Another is the personal part. I will feel deeply the loss of all the friends we've made among the faculty, staff, students and the community here. For the first time, my husband Chris and I will be relatively far away from our children who attend UC Riverside and Stanford. We hope that our children will feel that Indiana's a new home for them too and visit us often."

BV: How does your experience with NASA translate into helping



Córdova participates in a freshman discovery seminar at the University of California, Riverside and exchanges information during a 2005 visit to China and Korea.

you with your subsequent university positions and this role at Purdue?

FC: “At NASA I learned to appreciate the importance of making partnerships to secure one’s goals and the wisdom of formulating policy based upon principles, clear objectives and evidence. I also learned you can move an agenda along best by clearly announcing mission vision and values. These are things that have been of great help in my positions after NASA, and I think they will help me in my role at Purdue.”

BV: You listed the various firsts for the Purdue presidency – woman, X-ray astronomer, NASA chief scientist, Latina, soccer mom – in your acceptance speech. How significant is it nationally that gender and ethnicity are of far less importance than career accomplishments?

FC: “I think everyone brings a different set of experiences to the job of president or chancellor, and the institution benefits from those unique experiences. I’m happy that the focus is on career accomplishments, which show what you did with your background and gifts.”

BV: I’ve had university presidents today tell me they reluctantly get consumed with budgets, fund-raising and other financial issues. Facing those realities, how do you balance that out and maintain close contact with students, professors and other university personnel?

FC: “I think that you do have to balance it, but I will always find ways to have the contact with the students and faculty and staff because that is what I enjoy. I get great pleasure from being with them and hearing about their successes and their issues. I think that is one of the really important parts of being a university president – to understand their perspectives and how you can help them, enable them to do even more and more successfully, and work together on these issues. I’m not challenged by balance. Balance has been my middle name, balancing all sorts of things.”

BV: What are some of the ways you do that now, maintain that balance?

FC: “There are both structured ways and informal ways. For example, I just returned a few minutes ago from a staff luncheon that I hosted for staff that has served the University of California for more than 30 years. Some started at other UC campuses, but all are here at Riverside now. I asked each one to go around the table and talk about where they were 30 years ago and what they are doing now. It was just a very eclectic mix of people, and it was great to get to know about them a little better.”

“I meet regularly with the staff assembly. Every quarter they have a big meeting, and I get to give some remarks and (provide an) update on the campus and then stay after to talk with staff. I attend the parties that the staff has, whether its barbeques or holiday parties. For the students, it’s similar. I will attend, very shortly, a kind of awards banquet in one of the colleges (engineering), where they both celebrate their engineering achievements and have ballroom dancing. I go to many student events like that.”

“I do have structured events, but I also just walk around the campus during the noon hour when they are all out with their booths around the bell tower, and I stop and chat with them. With the faculty, I visit the departments regularly. I visited about 15 of them this past quarter. I just sit at a department meeting and talk with them and have them present whatever they would like to me. I talk a little bit about the vision and goals of the campus but more I’m there to hear what’s of concern to them.”

BV: In the years you’ve been involved in higher education, how have you seen the landscape change – the role of the president and the challenges in place?

FC: “I think that one has to balance both the internal and the external factors that concert to make a university strong, make it an attractive place that students want to come and where they get a great education. That requires a partnership with a lot more people. It’s not only about engaging everybody who works on the campus – whether they are faculty, staff or students to work toward the goals of the



Purdue University Presidents

- Martin C. Jischke: 2000-2007
- Steven C. Beering: 1983-2000
- Arthur G. Hansen: 1971-1982
- Frederick L. Hovde: 1946-1971
- Edward C. Elliott: 1922-1945
- Winthrop E. Stone: 1900-1921
- James H. Smart: 1883-1900
- Emerson E. White: 1876-1883
- Abraham C. Shortridge: 1874-1875
- Richard Owen: 1872-1874

university – but also means more than ever engaging the community. That’s everything from local to statewide to national and even global now – to be partners in the various enterprises that comprise the university, from research to teaching to service.”

BV: What are some of the ways at Purdue, or other universities, that you can further those international connections?

FC: “I have much more to learn about the ways that Purdue has been doing that. I’m, of course, more familiar with the University of California. We have a variety of partnerships from one-on-one collaborations between individual professors here and abroad to student education programs to student research programs abroad to research partnerships with other institutions. Here at UC we have identified, for example, 10 premier universities in China to collaborate with our 10 UC campuses. We call it 10 plus 10, and we do a host of activities with them. I’m really interested in extending the research mission through global collaborations, but especially extending the opportunities for our students to get an experience that can be transformative by getting to know and appreciate another culture, by going there and by also having students from there on our home campus.”

BV: With Purdue, most of the attention naturally comes to the West Lafayette campus. As you have learned about the university system, however, what were your initial impressions about the

opportunities or challenges at the other campuses?

FC: “I look forward to visiting the other campuses, which I have not been able to do yet. I have come to appreciate their different missions, in part from chancellor Mike Wartell from Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne, who was on the search committee, but also from my own conversations with others – in my exploration to understand various facets – to their online web sites. They all, of course, provide Purdue degrees, and they all have distinctive points of pride, which I would like to see and appreciate up close. Each campus is very important to its region and to Indiana, and it is critical they provide an excellent education for our students.”

BV: You’re coming on board at the same time as new presidents at Indiana and Ivy Tech. What opportunities does that present for taking a fresh look at higher education issues in Indiana?

FC: “The presidents of several of Indiana’s institutions of higher education have called me to welcome me to my new job. I’m grateful for their welcomes, and I am looking forward to working with them to enhance the well-being of Indiana. I think there are many opportunities for partnerships in K-12, in access to higher education, in health, economic development, the environment, technology, public policy – just a wealth of opportunities in which to form partnerships for the benefit of Indiana.”

BV: What are some of the major influences on your leadership style – people you have met, books you have read, confidants you have?

FC: “I think just about everyone with whom I have come into contact with has had an influence on me, from my parents and my siblings to my spouse Chris and my wonderful children. My immediate family has had the biggest influence on me. But also my bosses – for example, NASA administrator Dan Golden and Chancellor Henry Yang at UC Santa Barbara, who was a formerly a Purdue dean of engineering. A little bit of everybody has rubbed off on me, and I hope that I have paid attention and improved as a result.”

BV: What do you want people to say about France Córdova “X” number of years down the line when you retire from Purdue University?

FC: “The search committee asked me that, but looking backward instead of forward. But I have the same response, which is that I added value. That, I think, is just the most important thing that they can say about me – that I came in, assessed the situation, worked with others and, in the end, added value.”

BV: Just how hectic is this time of transition, in completing your work in California and preparing to come to Purdue?

FC: “How would you like that measured? It’s hard to have a metric for that. I think hectic enough is about it. It’s been interesting and challenging, but always fun, and people have been enormously supportive – from Purdue, of course, but also from UC Riverside. They have been very, very helpful and graciously supportive. I think everyone sees this as an opportunity for me, and I’m sincerely appreciative of that.”