



Teresa Lubbers: From the Classroom to the Commission

“Programs come and go. Funding comes and goes. What’s sustainable is people changing their attitudes. That’s what I think has been the biggest change.”

Teresa Lubbers is alluding to the positive urgency that continues to permeate education and workforce development in the state. The recognition that education beyond high school matters – and more so with each passing year.

As Indiana’s commissioner for higher education since 2009, Lubbers is currently the longest-serving such state executive in the country. She previously spent 17 years in the Indiana Senate and was chair of that group’s Education and Career Development Committee.

She talked with *BizVoice*® about her career path, inspiration and what’s happening at the Indiana Commission for Higher Education (CHE) to further cement why greater educational attainment is rightly one of the state’s top priorities.

***BizVoice:* Where did your passion for education come from? What inspired you to get into public service?**

Teresa Lubbers: “I was in cadet teaching when I was in high school (at Warren Central in Indianapolis). Then, I picked up a teaching license and went back to my alma mater and taught high school English. In each of my summers when I was in college, I had also interned in the mayor’s office when (Richard) Lugar was mayor of Indianapolis.

“I had this dual passion going with education and public service and government, but decided I needed to give it a shot to see whether or not I really wanted to do more in governmental public service. So,

during Lugar’s last couple of years as mayor, I went back and worked as his public information officer.

“Later, when I decided to run for office, I really did so with two imperatives in my mind and they were education and economic development, and the relationship between the two ... education was becoming more and more a predictor of your ability to have economic independence in your life, take care of yourself and your family.”

In terms of a mentor, I imagine it was such a tremendous opportunity working for Sen. Lugar.

TL: “Without a doubt, (Lugar) is the major influence in my professional career and in many ways my personal life as well (she met her husband, Mark, while working for him) because he stayed invested in me for 40 years. He continues to be my standard for what public service should be like.

“I had the privilege to speak at the senator’s interment at Arlington National Cemetery. ... I get emotional (reflecting on it). I looked at the audience and thought, you know, there were about 250 or 300 of us and most were former Lugar staffers. I thought about what he inspired people to do.

“If you looked at that audience, what they had continued to do in their lives because of his inspiration was pretty incredible. His legacy is certainly foreign relations and his legacy is certainly ag policy, but his legacy is all of us too – who wanted to be involved in public service and felt it to be a noble profession (because of him).”

The Commission, Indiana Chamber and others have set a target of 60% of Hoosiers attaining education beyond a high school diploma by 2025 – in the form of a credential or degree. How do you feel about where the state is with that effort and what can we do better?

TL: “We’ve made significant progress with a number that is incredibly difficult to move. . . . If you go back to when we started the goal in 2012, we were at a little over 33% to that 60% goal. We’re now at 43.4%. A portion of that bump has come from the fact that we now include quality certificates, which we did not include when we first started tracking that number.

“So about 5% of that jump has come from including certificates, but even the 5% jump that is on top of that in attainment is significant as well.

“We think we have in place programs and policies and funding mechanisms to help Hoosiers get there, but it’s going to require collaboration between employers, educators, policy makers, community leaders – all coming together to really send a message of why people should either change their lives and come back, or make the right decisions and get off to a strong start. I believe it’s an achievable goal. I think it’s the right goal, but I think it’s going to require a lot of effort on our part.”



Teresa Lubbers, a first-generation college graduate, shares that her parents instilled in her a “sense that education was the game-changer.” She feels that education beyond high school is even more critical today for “economic well-being. And increasingly, it marks the difference between those who have opportunity and those who don’t.”



BV: The Commission’s You Can. Go Back. program (focusing on getting adult learners to finish their education) has been in place for four years. What impact has that had on improving the lives of Hoosiers?

TL: “We knew that those adults more than ever needed some additional education, and employers needed them to come back. We really focused on less than 200,000 of the (identified) 750,000 because we were looking at people who had been out of school less than 10 years, who were at least 25% on their credits to actually getting where they needed to be.

“That didn’t mean that if somebody didn’t meet those criteria, they couldn’t come back and get the benefits of the program (such as grade or debt forgiveness, grants and tuition discounts). This was our marketing focus. A lot of people would have said this is the low hanging fruit, but it’s really not because their lives are complicated, and you may have to change their perception

of what college is compared to what it was when they were there.

“We have a significant number today who are still enrolled – close to 20,000. We have about 2,000 who have completed (their education). . . . We’re working with the Legislature this session because there was an expiration date in the (law) that was originally written to start You Can. Go Back. We’re working to make sure the expiration date is taken out.”

BV: The state and other interested parties have invested much time and capital into workforce development efforts. There have been great intentions, but is there enough coordination and cohesion, not to mention promotion of the services? What would you like to see?

TL: “Better awareness (of the offerings) is the first thing. And then after they’re aware, do they know how to navigate the system?

“What we’ve really tried to do at the Governor’s Workforce Cabinet (which Lubbers now chairs) is to flip the model from people needing to find agencies that will help them to actually putting the populations of people at the top of our paradigm of service. So, whether it’s the graduating high school student, the unemployed, the underemployed, the returning adult, the foster child, the veteran – all of those folks we put across as populations of people.

“And then we look at the agencies that serve them and (some) obviously overlap . . . but really very intentionally on top of that is the employer community and the communities themselves, making the case for why education and training is important. They’re the ones who are interacting with people every day, encouraging them to come back (to school and the workforce).

“You don’t put up obstacles to people who already live complicated lives with a complicated system to try to make them figure all this out. You kind of bring them in little by little by having them answer very simple questions first.”

BV: Everyone has their own metrics to meet, but it seems in the last few years that the Governor has pushed to make it less territorial with the state agencies and more focused on the overall goal. To the person, it doesn’t matter which pot they pick from for assistance.

TL: “Yeah, they don’t care. They don’t know whether it’s a Perkins grant or one from CHE. What they know is they’ve made a commitment to try to do something to

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change their lives. I do think that you (currently) have the right people with the right agencies with the right message. That gives us the opportunity to really clearly say to Hoosiers, 'It's about you, but we're going to help you do this. We're going to help you do what you know is in your best interest.'

BV: How involved should universities be in talent retention – to get graduates to stay in the state?

TL: "We're actually working right now with a (marketing)



On the Lugar Series for Republican women that she co-founded 30 years ago: "Our goal was that when people were looking for candidates to be on boards or commissions or people to work in state government, they would say, 'Is there a Lugar Series woman who could do this?' It was never just about running for office." With this year's class, the number of graduates is nearing 550.

program (put into law in 2019 that specifically addresses this issue) called Let Indiana Work for You. We're doing it in a pilot with Purdue, Ivy Tech, Indiana State and Ball State. We're piloting those four and, by the fall, in all the public schools. If the private schools want to participate, they can as well. We're working to put together materials (including videos, social media, etc.) to help them send a message to their students of why staying in Indiana is a good choice for them – whether it's cost of living opportunities or another benefit.

"The other way that we can do talent retention is really through what we're doing with internships and work-based learning. Because if someone has had a really great work-based experience, the likelihood of them staying here goes up exponentially.

"One of our metrics that we're talking about in our new strategic plan is that all higher education programs should have a commitment to some work-based experience. That could be a research project that's aligned to what they're studying or it could be an internship, a co-op, but that something aligned to career relevance would be a part of their program of study."

BV: Next year we'll have an appointed state superintendent for the first time. Do you foresee any change in how that position might work with higher education?

TL: "I do think it will help us even more clearly align the work from early childhood education to lifelong learning and smooth the transitions.

"It will be important when they look for a person for that job to identify the portfolio of work that you think should be in the Department of Education and then find someone who's really well suited to that work. And it may well be that this is an opportunity to look again at who's doing what in that sector.

"Are there some things we should bring back to K-12 that have been someplace else, or are there things that K-12 should be sharing with someone else? Looking at the portfolio of work first and then finding the right person who meets that is the way to go about it as opposed to just picking someone to do the job. I know that's what the Governor thinks too. The first (appointed superintendent) will be very important. It sends a signal."

What keeps you busy outside of the office?

TL: "I have six grandchildren who keep me very, very busy. I have three who live right across the street (all under three years of age). ... Family has always been central to me and continues to be. I have a group of friends that I get together with every week; we raised our kids together.

"I've been doing Pilates for 15 years, so I continue to try to stay a little active in that way. And then my faith journey has always been very important to me, my engagement with my church. I've been the chair of the YMCA (in Indianapolis) – the work they do there is very important. Other than the Lugar Series (for women, which she co-founded), the Y is my other (non-education) board that I'm on. Those are just some of the things that kind of keep me grounded."

Any final thoughts?

TL: "You know, I've considered it a privilege to do this work and there are a lot of people my age who obviously have retired. A lot of times it's because they have some other meaningful kind of work that they want to do. I get the privilege of doing that and still (come to) work."

RESOURCE: Teresa Lubbers, Indiana Commission for Higher Education, at www.in.gov/che

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