

LEAVING A LEGACY

ISU's Deborah Curtis Reflects

By Symone C. Skrzycki

"I want people in Indiana to know what a treasure it is to have Indiana State here, our long heritage of more than 150 years in the state and who we've been – that we've been tied to making this a better state."

That's the message Deborah Curtis, Indiana State University's (ISU) 12th president, shares as she prepares to retire June 30.

Curtis took the helm at ISU January 3, 2018. She's the institution's only woman to serve as president and an alum, graduating with a PhD. Her education career spans nearly 40 years throughout Indiana, Illinois and Missouri.

In this chat, Curtis offers up lessons learned, personal passions and cherished memories.

BizVoice: How did your parents influence your career choice and commitment to giving back?

Deborah Curtis: "I'm a first-generation college graduate. My parents met in the Army during World War II. My mom was from Chicago and my dad was from New York. Their big dream was for all of us (kids) to pursue college degrees. I'm the only one of my two siblings that completed that, but they had specific paths in their lives that they pursued.

"My parents talked to us about, 'Wherever you find yourself, just make sure you make the place better.' They were both very gregarious people and raised us to be that way as well – to connect and to be a part of doing something that benefited either the community or your own environment or your family or your workplace."

BV: What led you to the education realm?

DC: "My career in higher ed was in teacher education before I got into higher administration. It was a music teacher that meant a lot to me in high school who said, 'You'd make a great teacher.' I (wanted to) aspire to be just like him. To this day, we still exchange Christmas cards. I call him 'Mr. V.' He laughs at me every time because it's been 50 years or something since (he was my teacher). But that speaks to the respect I have for him."

BV: When you think about the challenging aspects of your job, what comes to mind?

DC: "Bringing such a large environment to consensus is a challenge, but I've always enjoyed the challenge. When you're in education, it's not a dictatorship. It's really a collaboration (among faculty, staff, students, etc.).

"Second to that is the personnel piece. There are 2,000 employees here. Making sure that everybody's at least conceptually on the same page and then working together (is paramount). I always drive it back to (the notion that) – in the middle of any table we sit at – there's the student: How will this impact the student? It's interesting because so many people come to those discussions from different perspectives. So, (it's about) focusing on what our ultimate goal is and making sure that we all feel rewarded beyond our paycheck for the endeavor we're involved in.

"I always say to graduates at commencement ... 'Find your passion.' I really feel blessed that education has been a passion for me. I can't think of a better field to be in, and I want other people to feel that way as well (in their pursuits)."

BV: Music is a special piece of your life. Talk about why.

DC: “My mother taught piano lessons in our house. From the time we were little, we always were around music and certainly through our high school careers were involved with that. I taught music when I earned my first degree. It’s an emotional art form. I taught everything from K through 12, depending on which job I was in (e.g., choirs, general music classrooms).

“So, it was my privilege to not only engage in that myself, but to help young people find a path to enjoy the arts – and particularly music – in their lives.”

BV: Under your leadership as the pandemic hit in spring 2020, ISU operated online for only six weeks and didn’t close. How did you accomplish that?

DC: “In order to continue to deliver on our mission to our students, everybody came together. I always say that it was a campus-wide will to continue to do what we do and do it in the safest way possible.

“We all – without much notice – flipped online those last six weeks of that spring semester. But I regularly had feedback from not only faculty, but students and staff that they wanted to be back in the fall.

“We followed the guidelines that needed to be followed. We did the masking. We did a lot of contact tracing in the beginning. We maintained a dashboard every week on positive cases and let people know we’d determined if we ever hit a 10% level on campus with positives, we would shut down. We never got above 2% or 3% any given week.”

BV: Among your volunteer efforts are serving on the Indiana Chamber’s Board of Directors and its task force for Indiana Prosperity 2035 (a long-range economic development strategy for the state). What drew you to those opportunities?

DC: “Indiana State University has always been focused on the workforce needs of the state. Most of our students come from Indiana and most of them stay here. We’re not like a lot of the other higher ed institutions that import a lot of talent and maybe don’t keep as many of them.

“That’s our goal – for our graduates to stay here and be productive members of our economy. We want our students to have careers of consequence and lives of purpose. To me, that was a pathway to be a part of the Chamber Board.



Dr. Deborah Curtis meets with students at Indiana State’s Day at the Statehouse. The event allows Sycamore students, faculty and staff to interact with legislators.



Chatting with a young adult in the Hulman Memorial Student Union, a hub of activity and socialization on the Terre Haute campus.

“(With) the (2035) task force, I jumped at (the opportunity) to connect business and higher ed in envisioning, ‘What are the pieces we need to accomplish?’ And certainly post pandemic, it’s getting people back into the postsecondary education opportunities to move our economy forward. We don’t have an economic environment anymore where a high school diploma is sufficient. Building that strategy and that vision really mattered to me. I was thrilled to be a part of that.”

BV: What will you miss most when you retire?

DC: “The people – because every day I get to interact with a lot of people. Thirty eight years (as an educator). In six years as president, I’ve welcomed in six classes as freshmen and everybody beyond that moving on as well as graduate students. There’s a very transformational part of a higher ed experience, and I get to watch all of them experience that! I’ll miss that a lot.”

RESOURCE: Dr. Deborah Curtis, Indiana State University, at www.indianastate.edu