





NextEra Energy Resources

DYNAMIC LEADER OF THE YEAR

TRANSFORMING EDUCATION

Elsener Paves the Way
With Passion, Purpose

By Symone C. Skrzycki

When BizVoice® poses its first question to Marian University President Dan Elsener – “How are you?” – his response is revealing.

“(It’s) hard to be better,” he declares with a smile. “My dad used to say that.”

Two things are immediately clear. One: Elsener exudes positivity. And two: His family and the various mentors who’ve helped shape his life are never far from his thoughts.

Also top of mind – always – is the privilege and responsibility that come with his role at Marian.

“It’s not only a job; it’s a total lifestyle because you have a community of people that you’re taking on a journey,” Elsener comments. “So, it’s not a nine to five or even a 60-hour a week job. It becomes part of your identity.

“You really need a lot of people around you encouraging you in that role. But you have to have that mindset in any enterprise. I’ve had the blessing of working with a tremendous board, and I’ve learned the power of strong values and culture. The Franciscan nuns that started Marian College instilled tremendous values.”

The Sisters of St. Francis established the school in 1851 in Oldenburg. It moved to Indianapolis in 1936.

Since Elsener took the helm at Marian in 2001, its student population has jumped from approximately 1,000 to over 5,000. Contributing to the growth are major endeavors such as the Fred S. Klipsch Educators College in 2016, Paul J. Norman Center (school of business) in 2018, E. S. Witchger School of Engineering in 2022, and Tom and Julie Wood College of Osteopathic Medicine (Indiana’s second medical school) in 2013.

Marian is the nation’s first Franciscan research university.

“Some people in the higher education business refer to us as the ‘Marian Miracle’ (due to its historically notable accomplishments). With so much help from so many good people and good values, we’ve found a tremendous ability to serve students and the larger culture and economy.”

Formative years to Indiana bound

Marian’s *Journey to 2030* strategic plan encompasses three strategic pillars: student access and success, faith in action and excellence in STEHM (science, technology, engineering, health professions and mathematics) and education illuminated by liberal arts.

Elsener’s personal and professional life



Four Franciscan values guide efforts at Marian University: dignity of the individual, peace and justice, reconciliation and responsible stewardship.



The Tom and Julie Wood College of Osteopathic Medicine emphasizes nurturing of the mind, body and spirit.

has included elements of each.

He was born and spent the early part of his life in Nebraska.

“I was one of six children,” he shares. “I had a strong background in Catholic elementary school and high school. I went to schools where faith was a big part of it. People expected a lot of you to do your best – behavior and academics – and that’s a good launching pad. Strong family, strong mom and dad, grandparents and extended family. I was blessed.”

Elsener attended Nebraska Wesleyan University in the 1970s, graduating in 3.5 years.

“There, I really learned how to be a student and a learner,” he recalls. “I had great professors. I studied political science and economics. One of the professors I had in

political science encouraged me. He was a professor and a state legislator, Senator Richard Marvel.

“He invited me to work in the Legislature with him as a research assistant,” Elsener notes. “I learned a lot. I learned to work with students, and I also would go on occasion to the state penitentiary with him where he taught constitutional law to inmates.

“He said to me one day, ‘Do you know what you are, Dan Elsener?’ I said, ‘No, Senator, what am I?’ He said, ‘Well, you’re a teacher. That’s what you’re really good at.’”

“That’s how I got into education. He saw things in me that I might’ve had a little idea I had, but he taught me a lot about what it is to be a great professor, a great teacher and a

great mentor to a person.”

Elsener’s first teaching job was at a high school in Kansas.

“I remember the administrator called me in around Thanksgiving in my first year. He said, ‘You have talent in this area. You ought to start studying to become a principal – because it’s good to be a great teacher, but you could have influence over hundreds of students.’”

A few years later, Elsener did just that, serving as a high school principal in Nebraska followed by Superintendent of Catholic Schools for the Catholic Diocese of Wichita.

“I noticed in working any time you work with an individual student or a group of people and you give them a larger purpose based on their talents and gifts, they want to do more. Great educators aren’t in the deficits business. They’re in the strengths business. They see it in you and they say, ‘Hey, why don’t you do this?’ Or, ‘You really have something there.’”

In the early 1990s, Elsener and his wife, Beth, moved with their family to Indiana where he led the Archdiocese of Indianapolis followed by a role as executive director of the Christel DeHaan Family Foundation prior to joining Marian in 2001.

Faith meets flourishing

A big part of Elsener’s continued enthusiasm after all these years is what the university stands for.

“We often challenge our students to understand that their education and the privilege that comes with it is not a private good. It’s something you achieve certainly, but it’s for the good of others,” Elsener asserts. “To build up society, influence culture and to innovate and really ultimately the whole thing here, when it’s illumined by faith and grounded in gospel values, it’s about human flourishing.”

Klipsch’s evidence-based teacher preparation programs are equipping students and educators with opportunities.

“At Marian, we’ve poured millions of dollars in becoming excellent in the science of reading. Looking at the research, we become expert in how you train teachers and coach them to do it,” Elsener remarks.

Boosting third grade reading scores, a pivotal point in a child’s education, is a main priority.

“The Klipsch Educators College trains teachers, principals, superintendents in bachelor’s degree, master’s degree and doctorates,” Elsener notes. “This year, schools that the Klipsch Center for Vibrant Schools (part of the Educators College) worked with in the science of reading got an average growth of 10% in student achievement in reading (with the state’s IREAD results).

“We have schools where only 35%, 40% and 41% of their children were passing (basic IREAD scores). When you see schools where people have just assumed, ‘Well, that’s all the better those kids can do’ and you see 20% and 30% increases in the number of children who passed after we’ve worked with them for two years – to change lives and trajectory like that ... it brings you to tears.”

Elsener estimates that by collaborating with the state of Indiana, the Lilly Endowment Inc., schools and other partners, “we’ve probably influenced 30,000 children. We’ve worked with 6,000 educators to teach the science of teaching and reading at a very high level.”

Being a good neighbor

The Riverside Education Innovation District (REID) will transform the former Larue Carter Hospital property on the near northwest area of Indianapolis into a dynamic community hub of lifelong learning and development.

“We drive every day to a beautiful campus with smart people, air conditioning, heating and food,” Elsener remarks. “It’s a beautiful place, Marian. And it’s a beautiful community. There’s a family feel.

“But we drive by neighborhoods every day on the way to Marian where that’s not their reality. So, we started to give some thought and prayer, ‘How could we be better neighbors?’”

“People (in the neighborhood) have been used to crime and low employment, low wages and lack of investment,” Elsener emphasizes. “Now, we’re recruiting big investment dollars to build up amenities and make it a better place to live. The REID is going to become a powerful state and national template of how an anchor institution partners and walks alongside our neighbors.”

Lilly Endowment Inc. awarded REID a \$25 million grant through its College and Community Collaboration initiative. Additional partners



Kicking off construction on the Riverside Education Innovation District in 2025. The project is designed to boost literacy skills and educational attainment as well as create transformative leaders on Indianapolis’ northwest side. (left) Elsener chats with Lamon Brewster of Brewster’s Place, a nonprofit that teaches life skills through boxing. (right) Commemorating the event with an inspiring inscription.

range from the Center for Leadership Development (CLD) and AES corporation to Vincennes University, which is creating a career and technical education center for high school students, and St. Mary's Early Childhood Center. Among the initiatives are raising literacy rates.

"There are so many far-reaching implications and ramifications from it and that's why it's so important," stresses Dennis Bland, president and CEO of the CLD. "It's not just about young people – as critical as that is – but it's about families and ecosystems and society and culture, and ultimately our entire community that we share."

Sharing his gift

Elsener has been the chair of the Indiana Chamber Foundation for the past two years and a member of its board of directors for two-plus decades. He participated in the development of each of the Chamber's three strategic plans for the state, including the most recent: *Indiana Prosperity 2035*.

"As we're exploring where the Foundation will continue to go and the impact it will make in the state of Indiana, he's the first person we'll always have that conversation with," says Todd Hurst, senior vice president of strategic partnerships and impact. "He's instrumental not only in determining what's helpful today and where we should be heading, but also how that might be impactful to the broader community and other organizations and funders and state government in a strategic way."

Mike Wells, president of REI Investments in Carmel, has partnered with Elsener on a variety of projects through the years.

"Dan's just a born leader and people follow him," he contends. "But they do that because he's been successful and because he's proven that he knows what he's talking about. He's soft spoken. He always listens to other viewpoints and is very thoughtful. But he's also to the point (asking), 'What are we trying to achieve and how are we going to get there? And how are we going to measure whether we got there?'"

"That's an extraordinary gift for someone to have."

Another cause Elsener champions is working with minority youth in Central Indiana to identify and navigate their career and educational pathways. He's served on the CLD Board of Directors for more than 15 years.

Elsener points out, "The Center for Leadership Development lights a runway, so to speak, for a kid to take off and find success," Elsener emphasizes. "(It tells them), 'These are the things that successful people do. This is how you study (for instance). These choices lead to success.'"

Bland explains, "The CLD was established in 1977 with a mission



Gov. Eric Holcomb presents Elsener with the Sagamore of the Wabash Award earlier this year in recognition of his educational innovation, community impact and leadership. Elsener also received the honor in 2011 and 2015.

of helping African-American youth become professional business and community leaders. If you're in fourth grade, you can (attend) our 21 after-school and evening programs. In terms of our approach to helping young people achieve their potential, we offer a values-based program model: character development, educational excellence, leadership effectiveness, community service and career achievement."

Reflecting on Elsener's contributions through the years to the CLD, he imparts, "I think his faith categorically enables him to see what others don't see in certain instances. It enables him to articulate in a way that is very lofty, very compelling, very convictional and yet very easy to comprehend. He has a way about him and ultimately it all translates into something that people believe, and it translates into something that people want to see."

Among other volunteer efforts through the years, Elsener has dedicated his time to the St. Vincent Health Board of Directors (where he served as chair), AES Board, and he was named a Living Legend by the Indiana Historical Society.



"All throughout my academic career, I was involved in a lot of leadership," Elsener reflects. "Class president, student council, captain of the football team. So, I learned about leadership and the difference it makes or doesn't make." (right) Along for the ride! Showing his support for the Marian Knights.

'Outward focused'

"I'll tell you something that seriously impressed me (when I first got to Indiana)," Elsener observes. "I was with Father Ted Hesburgh several times and got to talk to him and hear him speak. He was president of (the University of) Notre Dame for 30-some years. He was already retired.

"One time I had the occasion to ask him, 'What's one thing you know for sure or are very confident that you understand about leadership?' Because his track record was incredible. They always had a great football team, but he took that way beyond and built an internationally known university.

"And he said, 'You know. It's counterintuitive, but as a leader, it is true in leadership that it's easier to do really big things than to tinker at a bunch of small things. It's hard to pick up a flag and say follow me up the hill. We're going to go do a bunch of average stuff.'

"I never forgot it. People have been extremely generous with their time, talent, treasure, their ties, their trust, given testimony to this place (Marian) – because we've tried to do big things that are outwardly focused."

As an example, he cites fundraising.

"Marian University's growth has required



Celebrating Marian's 75th anniversary: Elsener cites his wife, Beth, as a force in his success through her encouragement and contributions to Marian and the community. The couple have nine kids and 38 grandchildren.

tremendous fundraising. People say to me, 'You must spend a lot of time fundraising asking people for money.' The irony of it is, it's not the case. We do a good job fundraising. You know what it is? When you believe people should give you money for yourself or for what Marian needs, it's hard to raise money. But when you're outward focused – that's a generous

mentality. People are generous with you and when I describe some of these projects, oftentimes donors will say, 'What do you need to get that done?' or 'How can I help?'

"That's when you invite them to prayerfully reflect on what they're being called to do. You'd be shocked at how generous people are. It's a beautiful thing to be a part of." ■



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