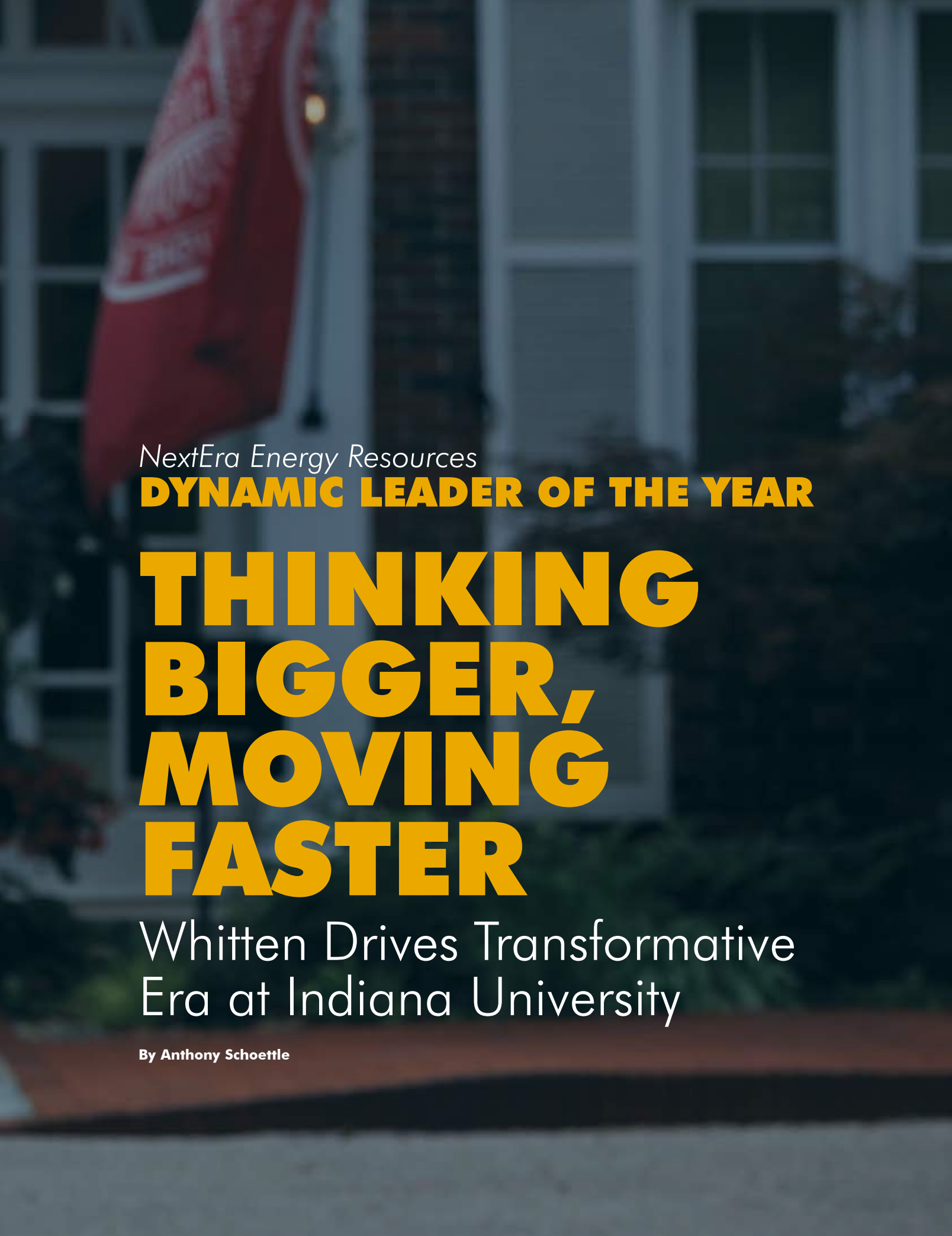




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DYNAMIC LEADER OF THE YEAR

THINKING BIGGER, MOVING FASTER

Whitten Drives Transformative Era at Indiana University

By Anthony Schoettle

Pam Whitten arrived at Indiana University in July 2021 at a pivotal moment. She was taking the helm of one of the nation's largest and most recognizable public universities as higher education institutions confronted mounting pressure to demonstrate value, adapt to accelerating technological change and better serve students and employers.

Five years later, Whitten has emerged as one of Indiana's most prominent leaders, guiding IU through a period marked by institutional transformation, record research growth, entrepreneurial expansion, athletic success and a renewed focus on serving the state.

For Whitten, however, any personal recognition is secondary to the mission.

"I get up every morning and put on my IU tennis shoes and am very focused on all the things we want to accomplish for the university and, most importantly, for the people that are at the university."

Students first

Indeed, throughout conversations with Whitten, a single focus surfaces repeatedly: students.

Whitten said every major decision at IU begins with the same question: How will it benefit students?

Scott Dolson, Indiana University's athletic director, says Whitten's commitment to students is evident in her day-to-day interactions across campus.

"The students are what she's all about," he notes. "I love seeing it when a football player comes up and talks to her. Or she'll see a random student in the crowd, and they want to get a picture with her, and she's just great talking to them and very approachable."

"My vision for Indiana University has been clear and unfiltered since I walked in the door," Whitten explains. "It's always about students. First and foremost, they are the center of our universe."

That philosophy is reflected in efforts to improve affordability, expand opportunities and strengthen student experiences while increasing IU's research and public service.

Among the achievements she cites most proudly is IU's growth in research productivity, including surpassing $1 billion in annual research expenditures, a first for a university in Indiana.

"There are a number of things that I'm so excited about at Indiana University in the past five-plus years," she stresses. "What we've done for students in terms of affordability and (the introduction of) new, exciting programs to create great experiences for them. The explosion of research activity and productivity … and new service that we're doing for the state."

Leading through change

Whitten believes many of higher education's greatest challenges mirror those facing business and industry.

"The biggest challenges facing higher education include the amazing pace of change that's going on across the U.S., expectations that people have, people questioning the value of higher education, enrollment issues and challenges," she notes.

Her response has been to embrace change rather than resist it.

"I think the key is to really acknowledge and understand what is meant by dynamic," she relays. "We live in a world where you can't necessarily operate at the pace of university time that we used to have."

That urgency – and a willingness to challenge convention – has become a hallmark of Whitten's leadership.

Melina Kennedy, CEO of the CEOs of Indiana Corporate Partnership (CICP), says Whitten's leadership has been defined by her willingness to challenge assumptions and adapt to changing circumstances. Kennedy said Whitten, who is on the CICP board, "isn't shy about challenging conventional thinking."

"Pam really defines the leadership trait of not assuming how things have always been done should be the way we need to do it in the future," Kennedy conveys.

"President Whitten is one of the most results-driven leaders I



Few Indiana University presidents have made so much change so quickly at the storied institution. Whitten's impact will be felt for generations.

have worked with in three decades at Indiana University," declares Patrick Hopkins, dean of the IU Kelley School of Business. "She sets ambitious goals, measures progress against them and keeps student success at the center of every decision."

One example, Hopkins notes, was the development of Indiana University's generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) 101 course.

"The development of our GenAI 101 course shows her leadership at its best: a bold vision, coupled with exacting standards and the trust to let others deliver what they do best," Hopkins says.

Whitten describes herself as "a glass-is-99%-full type of person" and her leadership style as enthusiastic and joyful.

"I think (being president of) Indiana University is the best job in the United States," she beams. "We have an opportunity to do so much to impact so many lives."

"Above all, she moves with urgency," Hopkins underscores. "Higher education must adapt with speed, and the stakes are considerable. President Whitten has met this moment with decisiveness and resolve."

Building an entrepreneurial university

Perhaps no area better illustrates Whitten's vision than her effort to make IU more entrepreneurial.

Under the IU 2030 strategic plan, the university's mission rests on three pillars: student success, research and discovery, and service to the state of Indiana. Whitten has made economic development a central part of that third objective.

"We were very bold about it," she remarks. "We are the state's flagship university and we're here to serve the state of Indiana."

That focus has generated initiatives such as IU Labs, IU Innovates and IU Inc. – all intended to strengthen partnerships with industry, encourage commercialization of research and create pathways for student entrepreneurship.

"You can see the startups that are occurring now," Whitten states. "You can see the discovery that's turning into commercialized activity."

"She doesn't just fly over the issues," Kennedy emphasizes. "She gets to know them deeply.

"President Whitten has positioned Indiana University as a driving force in the state's economic future. She has built the structures to carry research into the marketplace."

Whitten believes universities must do more than produce research; they must help translate discoveries into solutions, businesses and jobs.

"Whether you are a student that we're now preparing through IU Innovates to start a business – not when you graduate, but to think about starting while you're (still) a student – or whether you are faculty that discovers something that we now say, 'Let us help you commercialize it,' I think that's really propelling and changing the university."



Whitten has led the way in opening new facilities and launching new programs, while her affable, approachable style has strengthened the university's public relations.



A new chapter in Indianapolis

One of the most consequential decisions of her presidency involved the transformation of IUPUI into IU Indianapolis.

Whitten describes the move as difficult and necessary.

"It became very evident that what we were doing in Indianapolis through IUPUI had a nice history and there was some good steady work going on, but it was not what the city and the state needed," she acknowledges.

Today, IU Indianapolis operates as an independent R1 research university – the Carnegie Classification's highest research designation, recognizing institutions with very high research spending and doctoral production. Whitten believes the move has positioned the campus for accelerated growth and impact.

"The incoming freshman class has already grown 25%," she notes. "It's a challenge to make that kind of change and it's a challenge to move that fast, but it's gone beautifully.

"We have ambitions for IU Indianapolis to be the best public urban research university in the country," she affirms.

Football as a metaphor

While academic excellence remains central to her agenda, Whitten also has become an unexpectedly visible advocate for athletics.

When she arrived at IU, one of her earliest conversations with Dolson focused on football.

"I remember it like it was yesterday," Dolson recalls. "She said, 'Scott, we're going to be excellent at everything we do at Indiana University, and I'm including football in that.' "

"I love college football – always have been a student of it," Whitten exclaims. "But I also recognize that 70% to 80% of all college sports revenue comes from football and you better take it seriously."



A huge sports fan and self-proclaimed "Hoosier by choice," Whitten makes time to connect with students, supporters and local dignitaries.

Whitten credits Dolson's leadership, strategic investment and the hiring of football coach Curt Cignetti for helping transform the program and make athletics a powerful force for institutional unity.

"Athletics is often described as the front door for many universities," Whitten explains. "At Indiana University, we happen to be a school where so many embrace athletics as something that brings us all together."

She points to stories of alumni reconnecting with former classmates and friends during the football team's national championship run in 2025-26, saying the experience strengthened the bonds among IU's vast alumni network.

"The way it's brought all of us together has been one of the most rewarding things."

And while football has put a bright spotlight on IU – and Whitten – she promises major success in men's basketball and other sports is coming. "Just wait and see," she enthuses.

Innovation, engineering and the future

Whitten also sees major opportunities ahead in emerging technologies and workforce development.

She highlights significant investments in engineering education, including new faculty hires and expanded academic offerings in areas such as microelectronics and biomedical engineering.

The university, she argues, must continuously adapt to meet workforce needs now and decades into the future.

"You are going to see some new degrees," she previews. "We're very bent on putting forward education that will meet the needs of the workforce in the state of Indiana, not just in the next five or 10 years, but in the next 20 or 30 years as well."

Staying the course

Whitten's tenure has not been without criticism or controversy. Like many university presidents in the age of social media, she has faced public scrutiny from multiple directions. Her approach is straightforward.

"You have to stay true to what it is that is your mission and what it is that you're attempting to accomplish," she believes. "We live in a world with a lot of noise and a lot of opinions."

Dolson says one of Whitten's most impressive qualities is her willingness to make difficult decisions even when they may be unpopular.

"She's unwavering," he praises. "She's just going to do the right thing, and she's going to make the best decision she feels for the university at the time, regardless of what that might entail."

Kennedy said Whitten's willingness to make difficult decisions stems from a leadership style rooted in facts, execution and accountability.

"My impression of her leadership style is someone who is no-nonsense, fact-based, works hard and executes well," Kennedy surmises. "In my experience with her, she's fair, she's caring about the outcomes and very direct."

Kennedy added that Whitten consistently communicates the rationale behind major decisions, even when those decisions generate disagreement.

Whitten credits patience, integrity and focus with helping navigate those moments.

"I always feel that I need to give people that are critical grace," she offers. "If they love the university, I love them."

Grounded by family and perspective

While Whitten has become one of the most visible leaders in higher education, she says much of what shaped her leadership has occurred outside the office.

Born and raised in Missouri, Whitten often speaks about the importance of family in helping her maintain perspective. She reflected on balancing an increasingly demanding academic career with raising three children alongside her husband, Jason, whom she describes as her college sweetheart.

"I have been married about a hundred years to the same guy," she jokes. "I have three grown children … a couple are married; we have grandchildren. I was all into raising those kids. I loved it."

Whitten, in reality, married her husband in 1985, a week after they graduated from Tulane University in New Orleans. Whitten earned her master's degree from the University of Kentucky and her PhD from the University of Kansas.

Even as she advanced from professor to provost and ultimately university president, Whitten said she remained deeply involved in her children's lives, serving as a classroom

volunteer and attending school events whenever possible. Those experiences, she noted, reinforced the importance of seeing people as more than their professional roles.

"It has always helped me keep perspective on what's important," she reflects. "It's always helped me remember that all the people that are around you, whether they're students or faculty or staff or leaders, they also have the other side of the coin."

Away from the job, Whitten enjoys college sports and spending time with her growing family. As a self-described "Hoosier by choice," she says one of the joys of the past five years has been discovering Indiana's culture of collaboration and civic pride.

Those who know Whitten best describe a focused but approachable leader. She often strolls through campus – usually in a bright red jacket or sweater – to get coffee or tea and chat with students. She'll eagerly demonstrate how IU athletes celebrate a score, raising her hands in an "I" and then lowering them into a "U."



Those who know Whitten best say she quickly distills complex challenges and finds solutions while keeping students' needs foremost.

A lasting impact

When the conversation turns to her legacy, Whitten avoids discussing personal achievements.

Instead, she hopes future observers will look back on this period as a defining chapter in IU's history.

"I hope many years from now people will not necessarily talk about me individually," she begins. "But will talk about this time at Indiana University as a watershed moment."

She hopes it will be marked by a renewed commitment to students, a willingness to pursue ambitious goals and the confidence to embrace change.

"It's a challenging time for people everywhere," Whitten concludes. "But that's not an excuse not to be bold." ■

CONGRATULATIONS



Pamela Whitten

President, Indiana University

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