

Herman B Wells and the Legacy of Leadership at Indiana University

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In 1963 was a good year to seek a faculty position in higher education. Universities were burgeoning with the influx of students born to World War II veterans, and the prospects for further growth seemed limitless. State financial support was high, with no end in sight. Thus, finishing my Ph.D. in English at the University of Wisconsin, I visited many schools at their invitation. At each place I went, I attended a reception where I was introduced to faculty in the department by their titles: Assistant Professor X; Associate Professor Y; Professor Z; etc. At Indiana University, however, I and other candidates with me were introduced to faculty by their first names, no matter their rank or age. I sensed something different about Indiana and Bloomington and thought, much to the surprise of my friends in the East, that I would go there for “a few years”—that was 43 years ago.

When I started at IU in the fall of 1964, the things I had sensed in the interview the year before turned out to be accurate: the campus was collegial, friendly, humane, understated, and, if such a word can be used about a campus, happy.

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Kenneth Gros Louis in 1966

Courtesy of the Indiana University Archives

These characteristics owed a great deal to the personality of Herman B Wells, president of IU from 1937-1962, and university chancellor from 1962 until his death in 2000. Wells was an enormously generous person, one who valued every member of the academic community, from a custodian to the most senior and distinguished professor. He treated each with respect, reaching out to them as only someone with his deep regard for others could do. Wells and I became good friends (we also happened to share the same fraternity, Sigma Nu) when I myself became active in administration, first as chair of the English Department in the mid-1970s, later as dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and then, from 1980 to 2001, as chancellor of the Bloomington campus and vice president for academic affairs for the university. I was called back to that position in January 2004 and served for two more years, after which the trustees gave me the singular honor of naming me University Chancellor, a title that had only been held by one person before: Herman Wells.

In 2007, Indiana University begins a major transition. A new president took office on July 1; five or six trustees with relatively little experience on the board make up its majority; a new Bloomington provost has been chosen; and several new administrators are in place on all campuses—most notably in the Bloomington campus's largest school, the College of Arts & Sciences. Of course, one would expect major differences between 1964 and 2007. University-wide enrollment then was 36,397; full-time faculty numbered 1,539. Student enrollment in 2006-07 has climbed to 97,959; the university now employs 5,144 full-time faculty. More importantly, in 1964 Bloomington was still IU's only campus; the then-called extension centers around the state were just beginning to establish campuses in their own right. Even IUPUI would not be founded until 1969. Today, IU comprises eight campuses and two centers (Columbus and Elkhart), and the university maintains an annual budget of more than two billion dollars. Beyond these structural transformations within the university itself, however, many changes in American society and culture—some of them driven by college graduates and university leaders—have reshaped how IU is run, as well as how public higher education functions in the United States. Obviously, leading IU in 2007 requires a set of skills much different from those needed in 1964. The task may require, as well, a different set of values (I say "may" because some of the values espoused by Herman Wells are still valid).

The constituencies to which IU's new president must respond are far more numerous than they were when I arrived at the university. In addition to the students, families, faculty, and staff who remain central to the university, these constituencies today include more than 495,000 living alumni, the communities and regions in which IU has campuses or centers, all of the members of the General Assembly (as opposed to the handful of key legislators who, in Wells's time, tended to call the shots), a board of trustees much more into micromanaging than ever before, and a State Commission for Higher Education that has attempted since its establishment in the 1970s to get its arms around public higher education in Indiana.

The issues awaiting the university's new leadership, while not unlike those of 1964, are much more complicated and complex. As the percentage of the operating budget from the state has decreased over the last thirty years, the gaps must be made up. Some of that need has resulted in higher tuition, but there remains great pressure on the IU Foundation and on the development officers of the individual campuses

and schools to raise private funds, as well as a push for more external funding from federal agencies, foundations, and industry. There exists here and elsewhere in the country a new emphasis on public universities as engines for economic growth in their states. Indiana, which is, like Michigan, Texas, and California, staking its future heavily on research in the life sciences, will be requesting between 1.2 and 1.5 billion dollars from the state over the next decade in support of the initiative. Interest in IU's athletic programs, especially football and basketball, stands at an all-time high; these programs exert their own demands upon the university's fiscal resources. Meanwhile, as undergraduate tuition has increased, students (and in some cases their families) view themselves as customers entitled to certain rights and privileges; their further expectation that undergraduate education should lead directly to employment translates into enormous interest in the quality of placement offices. Several years ago what was initially created in the 1970s as the Indiana Vocational and Technical College was transformed, at the urging of Gov. Frank O'Bannon, to a community college. The campuses of Ivy Tech now offer general education courses as well as vocational and technical training. This major shift offers challenges, especially to IU's regional campuses, and perhaps opportunities as well. The tension between IUPUI and Bloomington, which has existed for many years, has grown greater in recent years as IUPUI faculty and alumni urge the trustees and the state to recognize their campus's research strengths, and even to consider IUPUI an equal, in its quality, power, and authority, to campuses in Bloomington and West Lafayette.

This final issue raises an important question that will continue to face IU's leaders in the coming years. Is Indiana University one university or a university system—that is, are we a single entity with multiple campuses, or a collection of campuses under one name, such as the University of Wisconsin? Presidents and board members have consistently advanced the idea that IU is one university. Tom Ehrlich, who served as IU president from 1987 to 1994, coined the phrase “one university with eight front doors.” Ehrlich's slogan really didn't hold because of the feeling that Bloomington was the dominant campus; the phrase turned into “one university with one front door and seven trap doors”! Myles Brand, president from 1994 to 2002, tried the phrase “America's new public university,” but that did not get very far either, as alumni wanted to know what was wrong with America's *old* public university.

As these unsuccessful labeling efforts suggest, the controversy over IU's identity reflects a broader cultural critique of higher education. The

existence of such a critique should not surprise us. During the Viet Nam and Watergate years, the military and government came in for close scrutiny. The questionable practices of savings and loan associations, healthcare providers and insurance companies, and corporate CEOs and their boards of directors, have each garnered similar public attention in their time.

The attacks on higher education flourished between the late 1980s and the mid-1990s. The reasons for the appearance during this period of such books as *Profscam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education* (1988) by Charles J. Sykes; *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (1987) by Allan Bloom; and *Tenured Radicals: How Politics has Corrupted our Higher Education* (1990) by Roger Kimball are quite clear: each of these attacks responded to the growing practice, especially in research institutions, of providing significantly greater rewards to faculty members for their research activities than for the quality of their teaching or service. My colleagues on the Committee for Institutional Cooperation (CIC, comprising the chief academic officers of the Big Ten plus the University of Chicago) recognized this skewed rewards system and tried to identify means to enhance rewards for good teachers. Obviously, research, because it is reviewed by external entities (whether faculty committees or advisors to agencies and foundations), is much easier to measure than teaching. Still, significant advances have been made against the skewing of the reward system, and the attack on "children teaching children" (a reference to graduate students taking over much of the undergraduate teaching load) has subsided.

There were, however, consequences to these attacks. As legislatures across the country decreased the proportion of state contributions to the operating budgets of public higher education institutions, universities made up the difference in hefty tuition increases, often outpacing rises in inflation. Parents came increasingly to expect proper training, placement, and care for their children, and students, acting in the role of customers, expected special treatment. I have heard many presidents point out that the phrase "state supported"—a normal synonym for public higher education in Herman Wells's time—changed to "state assisted," and has more recently become "state located." In some states the percentage of the budget from the legislature rests in single digits. The state-provided percentage of IU's operating budget was 48 percent in 1976 and 23 percent in 2006; for Bloomington, the figures are 52 percent in 1976 and 22 percent in 2006. In such an atmosphere of questioning

and criticism, university trustees or regents want detailed information about policies in which they took no interest at all in past decades. The responsibility of continual explanation, defense, and advocacy falls heavily on administrators at all levels of institutions like IU.

Another casualty of the critical attention focused on universities has been the average administrative term of office. During my first decade or so at IU, it was typical for chairs of large departments to serve up to 25 years; the same was true of deans. While the number of years was somewhat less, presidential service tended to range into double digits. Now, chairs and deans come and go with much greater frequency, while the typical college president in this country serves an average of five or six years. This change adversely affects the potential for long-range planning—which is in my opinion crucial to the success of higher education institutions—and it also leads to real confusion among citizens concerning the priorities (because they seem to change so often) of institutions like Indiana and Purdue, in this state, and of comparable institutions in surrounding states.

Herman Wells was as richly endowed with leadership skills as anyone I have known. But the number of constituencies and the demand for accountability that characterize today's public university would have taxed his talents to the fullest. What skills, then, are needed to respond to these many constituencies and to satisfy their needs, requests, even demands? What skills will tomorrow's leaders require to meet the challenges presented by the issues that face not only the Bloomington campus, but IU overall?

Bloomington and IU leaders need, above all, enormous energy. The staggering demands on their time come not only from faculty, staff, students, and alumni, but also from groups such as the state Chamber of Commerce, and from entities formed either by the governor or the state legislature to revamp the Indiana economy as it shifts away from manufacturing and agriculture and toward technology. The president in particular must meet with individuals interested in technology transfer, with state government officials planning trips abroad who need information about the countries they will be visiting, with various economic groups focusing on the life sciences or medical research in general, with legislators concerned about the relationship between IU's School of Education and the state's K-12 schools, with managers of the Clarian Health Partners experiment that joins the IU and Riley hospitals with Methodist Hospital in Indianapolis. These and other meetings come on top of one-on-one conversations with members of a board of trustees

that delves more deeply, from my perspective, into the organization of the institution than was the case in the last thirty years. Some want to know in detail the admissions process; others are looking at outsourcing entities such as the motor pool, the bookstore, food services in the residence halls, printing services—indeed anything not directly related to the academic mission of the institution. Herman Wells certainly had energy, but that energy was directed to a smaller number of individuals and a smaller cluster of issues.

Faculty and alumni, as perhaps has always been the case, expect their leaders to have excellent academic credentials while also demonstrating strong managerial experience. That combination is becoming increasingly difficult to find. Some institutions have gone to an outside and inside “president,” though not calling it as such—meaning that one individual focuses on fundraising, alumni activities, and legislative relations, while the other, almost like a co-president, focuses on the academic needs of the institution and on the best means to enhance its reputation and strengthen its faculty.

“Vision” is an overused word in higher education, as it is elsewhere in American culture. Nonetheless, the president is expected to demonstrate vision and to lay out a clear plan—even a “strategic plan”—that points the institution in the directions it needs to go to meet its priorities and to respond to its multiple constituencies and issues. Everyone wants a bit of the president’s time, wants him or her to manage the institution well, to continue to demonstrate strengths as an academic, and to express a vision that still remains grounded in sound business practices. As more than one person has said, institutions of higher education looking for a president are trying to find someone who is like “God on a good day.”

The business of running an institution the size and complexity of IU, then, differs significantly from Herman Wells’s time. In the many presidential staff meetings I attended in my 23 years as Bloomington chancellor and vice president for academic affairs for IU, it was difficult at times to know if I was in an academic institution or not. We talked about bond ratings and the intricacies of bonding authority for certain new buildings, about how IU would present itself at the State Fair, about the need to update the infrastructure of an old campus like Bloomington, about legal issues surrounding affirmative action and disabilities, and about other matters that simply were not on the table during Wells’s presidential tenure.

Wells was a wonderful fundraiser. While we expect the same of the president and his staff in 2007, the stakes are much higher: fundraising



Herman B Wells, with IU faculty, on the day of his inauguration as university president, 1938

Courtesy Indiana University Media Relations

has become the source of such a significant percentage of the budgets of individual schools and campuses, as well as of public universities in general. The same is true of external research support from federal agencies and national foundations. The call for more faculty research is as much about institutional financial needs as it is about raising academic reputations. Imagine how challenging it is for a president and his staff to balance the time devoted to fundraising and to legislative relations, both state and federal, with time needed to maintain contact with major federal granting agencies as well as major foundations, with time needed to cultivate prospective major donors. That in itself might be considered a full-time job, but is only a portion of what a president must do. The challenge is greater in Indiana because ours is not a wealthy state, and the legislature supports two major research institutions, while IUPUI seeks to become a third.

Thanks in part to these fiscal pressures, Division I athletics have, for good or ill, become bigger than ever at institutions like IU. The income derived from television and radio broadcast rights, from adver-

tising in football or basketball programs, and from the sale of logo T-shirts, sweatshirts, and every other kind of item is staggering. Alumni interest in athletics, always high, is even higher now than it was in Wells's time because of the impact of television, especially ESPN, which televises hundreds of college basketball and football games each year. The Big Ten TV Network will begin soon; each institution in the Big Ten expects to net an additional five to eight million dollars in revenue annually from the network's broadcasts. The fact that the University of Tennessee, Ohio State University, and the University of Michigan have been battling for several years over which school's stadium would have the largest seating capacity is one more indication of how close universities have come to professionalizing intercollegiate sports.

In addition to being more dependent than ever before upon commercial revenue, the contemporary university must also respond to the diversification and globalization of American culture. Given all the controversy surrounding affirmative action, it remains the case that ethnic groups expect not only to be heavily recruited at places like IU, but also to find there assistance through mentors, tutors, academic support centers, and advisors for especially difficult courses, most notably in mathematics. For a small state such as Indiana, the challenge is even greater. With a minority population so much smaller than that of surrounding states such as Illinois, Michigan, and Ohio, Indiana draws from a smaller minority applicant pool; the battle to get the best and brightest from that pool is fearsome. The president, of course, does not actively recruit, but he or she is certainly expected to encourage appropriate actions to enhance diversity at all levels of the institution, as well as to speak out with some regularity on the importance of exposing university students to the kind of diversity that they will surely encounter in the decades after they have graduated.

More than most university presidents, Herman Wells understood the concept of globalization long before that word became commonplace. Having said that, Wells did not have to deal with the large number of international students attending IU (although there were more than at many other institutions in his time), nor did he have to deal with the growing belief that undergraduates must spend a significant time overseas—and by that I mean not just several weeks, but preferably a whole semester or year, learning another language and about another culture. The Eurocentric model is fading, as the importance of India and China in particular becomes more apparent and as the need for university-to-university relationships, student and faculty exchanges, and sup-

port in helping to build institutions of higher education in such countries grows each year. The president is expected to have a real sense of these external forces; people anticipate that he will have a plan for further internationalizing campuses such as Bloomington and for achieving global literacy for all IU students.

With all of these demands on a president's time, one cannot overlook the fact that faculty and students in particular, and to a lesser degree staff, perceive the president as their leader and therefore expect him or her to take a significant interest in them. With all the other groups and individuals the president must deal with, he needs to remember that his primary audiences are faculty and students. This means that the president must be visible at faculty events, involved in faculty hires at advanced levels, knowledgeable about major shifts in disciplines and professional schools and how to deal with them, while also interacting on a personal level with student leaders. Is there enough time in a day? In a week or a month?

Institutions of higher education are not dictatorships, as they were not in Wells's time. People expect the president and his team to be good consensus-builders, and that, obviously, takes time as well as much careful planning and effort. New initiatives don't spring full-blown from the president's head. They are gradually introduced, fleshed out, widely discussed and debated; then, assuming some consensus gathers around them, action can be taken. Wells had to do the same thing, but, as I have said, the circle of constituents involved was much smaller and the number of groups needing to be placated was also smaller. That, as many know, is one of the criticisms of higher education—it is not nimble enough. I can think of many examples when IU has been nimble if necessary, but it is not the customary mode of behavior.

When all is said and done, university leaders hope to be beloved. That was certainly true of Herman Wells. I think it is much more difficult now for any university president to be beloved; to expect agreement on any of the complex issues I've commented on, as well as among the various constituencies of the institution, is extraordinarily challenging. Praised for candor, honored for good achievements, noted for some striking and successful initiatives—all might be possible, but "beloved" is probably not going to be a word used at a president's farewell reception.

And that brings me back to the underlying values of higher education. When I came to IU in 1964, I found it, as I indicated earlier, collegial, friendly, humane, understated, even happy. Each of these values is, in my opinion, becoming more problematic at IU and other institutions

like it in the first part of the twenty-first century. Years ago, the collegiality of the campus resulted from the fact that many faculty were hired at the same time in the same department or school as the university expanded significantly its faculty ranks. With departments such as English or History hiring six or more faculty in a given year, collegiality was almost built in. Now, it is more common that one and at the most two might be hired, and, given the pressure on them to achieve tenure, they might not have the time to get to know colleagues in related departments or schools. That's one reason why the Bloomington campus some seven years ago initiated a series of information sessions and monthly programs for all new faculty on important topics—the point was not solely the topic or the information, but rather to get new faculty together so that they would know their peers across campus and be ready to participate fully in campus service when the time came that they achieved tenure. Unfortunately, the pressure on tenure is such that most chairs and deans will encourage young faculty to focus on their research and teaching, and not do much service; thus, when faculty members receive tenure, they are not in the habit of serving the community and the campus. One can see this in the membership of the elected Bloomington Faculty Council, which has changed only slightly over the last several decades. I'm told by my colleagues on the CIC that this is a major problem for the other Big Ten institutions, as well.

While IU remains a friendly place, the competition for resources creates tensions among schools, deans, faculty and staff, even students, and those tensions undermine the natural inclination, on a campus such as Bloomington's, to remain friendly and open. Internal competition for research awards and other kinds of recognition is intense, and while such competition may enhance the campus reputation, I don't believe it leads to the kind of friendly atmosphere that I experienced forty years ago.

The competitive spirit strikes, as well, at other aspects of university life. The interest on the part of several trustees in outsourcing many activities, such as the university's bookstores, overlooks a major strength of a campus like Bloomington's. In part because of the size of the city of Bloomington, employees on campus have worked here for dozens of years, as have their siblings, perhaps their parents, even their grandparents. That tradition has created a peculiar and unique culture among Big Ten institutions. All the staff members that I know, no matter where they work, have enormous loyalty to the Bloomington campus and to IU, and take great pride in the ways in which their work contributes to the

success of the institution. If the trustees continue to outsource other entities not directly contributing to academics, inevitably over time individuals in charge of these units will have little or no loyalty to Bloomington and IU, little or no sense of pride in how they are advancing the institution. The money saved from this outsourcing is not great and is, in most cases, one-time funding only. This gives the current trustees additional resources to devote to infrastructure and renovations, but it leaves future trustees with no such resources, without knowledge of what prices might be charged by the external agency that wins the bidding process and becomes the “owner” of the bookstore, residential food services, printing services, or whatever. In terms of maintaining Bloomington culture, outsourcing is shortsighted; in terms of the resources gained, it makes the current trustees look good at the expense of burdening their successors. Inevitably, outsourcing leads to layoffs or to shifts to new jobs which may or may not take advantage of the employee’s strengths built over time. In short, outsourcing is already making the campus less humane than it was in Wells’s time and has the potential of destroying a culture that made the campus so attractive to me when I arrived here in 1964.

One of the many reasons why Herman Wells was beloved was because he was so visible. A president gives a face and a voice to a university. Now, however, that face and voice may be more visible to constituencies and audiences outside of IU campuses than it is to those on-campus constituents who want the president to be at once their colleague and leader. That traditional presence before faculty, staff, and students is not just an agent of collegiality—it is itself an act of collegiality: if the president is known, the campuses feel that he or she knows about the people and the character and the value of the work that they do. I have said elsewhere that I deeply regret that outgoing IU president Adam Herbert’s enormous warmth did not get sufficient attention during his term. That may be a result of the structure of the job. Perhaps the values that Herman Wells stood for—a sense of commonality, of working to achieve and to advance common educational and institutional results—are now irretrievable. Still, they are the ones that Wells embodied, and the new president, along with the people who help to arrange the structure of his job, would do well to try to find twenty-first-century ways to show that the IU presidency continues to stand for the things that people in the University will do and believe in for four years, or eight years, or their entire lives.