

Indiana's 21st Century Scholars

A new community college system and college prep curriculum are improving the state's position

Photos by John Starkey, Black Star, for CrossTalk

By Susan C. Thomson

INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA

IN ITS MIDDLE-AGE, Ivy Tech has been reborn—again. At the beginning of the current academic year, what began as a vocational-technical school 43 years ago and grew into Ivy Tech State College, with 23 locations around the state, became Ivy Tech Community College of Indiana.

New signs on the campuses, and a crisp new green and white logo, proclaim the new name. A \$500,000 statewide advertising campaign—featuring smiling young people and accompanied, in its radio and television versions, by a soft rock beat—drives home a new message: The “new Ivy Tech” is affordable, close to home, the starting point of choice for students who want to prepare for good jobs or transfer to four-year colleges.

For the college, the name change comes as just desserts, a belated recognition of the kind of school it pretty much already was.

For the state, community college is a whole new concept, something it never had before.

And for Stan Jones, Indiana's higher education commissioner, it's about time. “I think Indiana has always had a good higher education system,” he said. “One of the things we didn't have was a community college (system).”

Ivy Tech is the latest and most visible of a synergistic mix of initiatives that for 15 years or so have been reinventing Indiana public schooling from grade school through college. Chief among the others:

- An inventive program that allows all of the state's low-income students to qualify for college scholarships.
- Stiff statewide requirements for college preparation in high school.

Ivy Tech State College has been transformed into Indiana's first system of two-year community colleges.

With less than 15 percent of residents 25 or older holding a bachelor's degree or higher, Indiana consistently ranked among the two or three lowest states in the educational level of its adults. Only 13 percent of its high school graduates had studied a college-prep curriculum. Only half were going straight on to postsecondary education—a college-going rate that put the state in 34th place nationally.

- An organization that, by state law, brings a wide range of interest groups together to hash out educational policy.

As recently as the early 1990s, the state's higher education system was behind the national curve in attracting and graduating students.

Such were the outward signs of what Jones and others describe as a perception, pervasive in Indiana, that high school graduates didn't need to go to college as long as they could get good jobs in manufacturing. But as that long-dominant sector of the state's economy began to rust away, it dawned on the state's business, education and political leaders that things had to be done to change that perception.

“What you had in this changing economy was a tremendous demand for skill improvement,” said Steve Ferguson, former state legislator, former member of the Indiana

Commission for Higher Education, and now president of Indiana University's Board of Trustees and chairman of Cook Group Inc., a worldwide medical products company based in Bloomington.

By 2002, the state's statistics were improving dramatically. Two-thirds of high school graduates were earning a college-prep diploma, and 62.4 percent, the tenth best rate in the nation, were going immediately to college. Even though Indiana's population was growing more slowly than the nation as a whole, enrollment in the state's public colleges and universities was increasing at a faster rate than the national average.

These new claims to fame came in addition to one important asset that Indiana already had: one of the nation's most generous financial aid programs for college students. It was then—and continues to be—rated among the nation's ten largest by the National Association of State Student Grant and Aid Programs. Unlike states that pour much of their financial aid into merit scholarships, Indiana spends about 90 percent of its resources on need-based help.

In 1990 Indiana took a major new step in that direction with the launch of 21st Century Scholars, a program that



In the biotechnology lab at Ivy Tech Community College, in Indianapolis, instructor Todd Murphy works with students Lori Bancroft and Kim McKinney.



Stan Jones, Indiana higher education commissioner, and Suellen Reed, the state's superintendent of public instruction, have worked together on reforms in Indiana postsecondary education, including creation of the state's first community college system.

promises middle school students who qualify for the federal school lunch program eight semesters of full tuition at an Indiana public college or university, or a like amount at one of the state's private schools. All the students must do is sign up, maintain a C average in high school, and stay out of trouble. Indiana was the first state to create such a program.

According to the State Student Assistance Commission of Indiana, about half of the students who have signed up in middle school have stayed the program's course through high school. Of those, roughly nine out of ten have gone on to college, where their numbers have grown from 1,442 in 1995-96, the year the first of them were freshmen, to 8,228 in the 2004-05 school year. The commission has just begun to collect data on how many have graduated.

One of the successes is Ron Adams, 22, of Hammond, Indiana, who expects to get his bachelor's degree in organizational leadership and supervision in May from the combined campus of Indiana and Purdue universities in Indianapolis (IUPUI). The oldest of four children whose single mother works as a teaching assistant in a Head Start program, Adams credits her for always being "big on going to college." All four of her children got the message. Adams' younger siblings include a sister at Indiana State University in Terre Haute, a brother getting ready to graduate from high school and attend IUPUI, and a sister who is a high school sophomore. All are in the 21st Century Scholars pipeline.

As much as possible, Adams says, he has tried to be a role model for the younger ones, talking up his positive college experiences and never sharing his difficulties, like his struggle as a freshman to get up to speed on a perplexing new computer system. Adams laments that none of his high school friends

took advantage of the Scholars program, or went to college at all. Many of his college friends who might have been eligible didn't sign up, either.

As the Scholars have grown in numbers, so have the state's grants to them. Last year these totaled \$17.1 million out of a total grants budget of \$161 million, an amount that itself had nearly doubled in seven years.

Those have included some rough budget years for a state that is anything but flush with money, yet year after year it has sweetened the grants pot. So how does the assistance commission get so lucky? Interim Executive Director Dennis Obergfell smiles when he hears again a question he says he gets a lot from his peers in other, less bountiful states. "We've been fortunate," he said, in having a succession of supportive legislators and governors, of both political parties, who believe in the commission's mission.

Nick Vesper, the commission's policy and research director, makes the process sound easy: "We figure what we need in order to meet student need and then go to the legislature and ask for the money, and they've been giving it to us." This year's maximum awards are up ten percent from last year's—to \$5,172 for state colleges and \$10,014 for in-state private ones.

Those grants that give Indiana students the means to go to college are indexed now to a college-prep high school diploma that came about in 1994 and was designed to ensure that students arrive on campus at least somewhat prepared to do college work. This program is called Core 40, for the minimum number of semester

credits it requires, among them eight of English, six of mathematics, six of science and six of social studies. By taking specific additional credits and meeting certain academic standards students can earn the diploma with "academic honors."

With that they qualify for 20 percent more need-based aid than students without Core 40 diplomas.

Last year the legislature upped the academic ante on all of the state's students by making Core 40 the standard not only for admission to Indiana's public universities but also—beginning with the class of 2011, this year's seventh graders—for graduation from the state's public high schools. High school students will be able to opt out of the curriculum only with parental permission. Indianapolis Public Schools, the state's largest district, with 39,000 students, has set a goal of graduating all students with some kind of Core 40 diploma by 2011.

John DeBoe, principal of the city's Crispus Attucks Middle School, says he has detected "resistance and anxiety" about that high aim, especially on the part of parents, who fear their children will drop out of school rather than risk failure on the Core 40 track.

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State Senator Luke Kenley, a member of the senate education and workforce development committee, is more skeptical still. With two-thirds of Indiana's high school graduates already earning one of the new diplomas, and with special education students

accounting for about 17 percent of the state school population, Kenley wonders how many more students Core 40 can gain. "I think we're into overkill here," he said.

Like much education policy in Indiana in recent years, Core 40 came about as a consensus of people from perspectives not always easily reconciled. In this case, they included representatives of higher education, elementary and secondary education and business, the latter faction led by the Indiana Chamber of Commerce, which has consistently backed higher educational standards at all levels.

An even broader group got together in 1998 and formed the Indiana Education Roundtable, which consists of a revolving roster of about 30 representatives of K-12 and postsecondary education, business, labor, government and others who make recommendations on the gamut of state education issues. Jones said the group was "born out of frustration that we were having these battles between Republicans and Democrats in the legislature and between the business and the education communities, and a sense that we weren't making progress and we needed to do it differently."

In 1999 the legislature wrote the Roundtable into a state law designating the governor and state superintendent of public instruction as its co-chairs. Since then the group has gathered clout, to the point that it now drives the state's education agenda. In its current push for a seamless state system from pre-kindergarten through college, the Roundtable is calling for greater attention to kindergarten and pre-school, adult education, and high school and college dropouts. One-quarter of Indiana college freshmen don't make it to the sophomore year, the group reports.

By the Commission for Higher Education's own reckoning, fewer than half of students who start bachelor's degree programs, and fewer than a third who start associate's degrees, finish them. Although the percentage of residents 25 and older holding at least a four-year college degree has risen to slightly more than 21 percent, Indiana remains stuck among the bottom five states by that measure. "We're still a blue collar state," said Jones by way of explanation.

At all levels, Indiana education remains a work in progress, with Jones very much in the thick of it all. Besides constantly advocating for higher education, he is vocal in his support of proposed legislation that would require the state's public high schools to better track dropouts, potential as well as actual. Such across-the-board involvement is typical of a man Kenley described as "the thinker and driver" behind

Indiana's education initiatives.

Jones is a career politician whose resume begins with 16 years as a state representative. Given a district that included Purdue University, his alma mater, and a mother who had been a teacher, Jones says he naturally gravitated toward education issues. As a legislator, working closely with then-Governor Evan Bayh, he wrote the House bill that created 21st Century Scholars. Later, as Bayh's senior education adviser, Jones was instrumental in bringing various interest groups together in support of the Core 40 curriculum.

As higher education commissioner, Jones pushed for creation of the Education Roundtable. Though he never has been a member of the group, "Stan was a part of the work," said Suellen Reed, a former public school teacher and administrator, now the state's superintendent of public instruction. "He came to all of the meetings. He helped us pull things together."

She calls him Stan; he calls her Suellen. That they are on a first-name basis and say they are friends and collaborators speaks to the ability of Indiana's disparate education interests to join forces these past few years out of mutual concerns. In 1992 Jones and Reed ran against each other for state superintendent of public instruction, she as a Republican and he as a Democrat. Kenley, a Republican, says bi-partisanship has become the rule on state education issues because in Indiana the two parties are "not so far apart that if there's an issue of importance to us we can't get together."

In 1995 the higher education board picked Jones as commissioner. Steve Ferguson, the Indiana University governing board president, said Jones' "passion for what we were doing, his love for the state" made him the standout in a field of candidates for the job, most of them professional educators.

One of Jones' main accomplishments as commissioner is the transformation of Ivy Tech State College into Indiana's first system of two-year community colleges.



Carol Bodie (right) instructs Melissa Lambright in Practical Nursing, one of the most popular vocational programs at the 23 Ivy Tech Community College campuses.

“Some legislators didn’t know what a community college was,” Jones said. Purdue and Indiana universities also took some convincing, because, he explained, they feared community colleges would cost them students. Kevin Brinegar, executive director of the Indiana Chamber of Commerce, believes the state’s two largest universities effectively “headed community colleges off at the pass” about 40 years ago by establishing regional campuses around the state and allowing them to offer two-year associate’s degrees.

“Unfortunately the regional campuses have evolved in the direction of trying to be main campuses,” Brinegar said. “They wanted to offer bachelor’s degrees, graduate programs.”

Meanwhile, he added, their associate’s degrees were failing to focus on the workplace skills Chamber of Commerce members wanted in their employees. Besides, added Jones, “Their tuition was twice as much as it would be for a community college, so they weren’t affordable for typical community college students.”

Kenley says he and other legislators simply had no idea how many students community colleges would attract. In 2000 the legislature took a tentative first step toward the semblance of a statewide community college system when it forced a cooperative arrangement between Ivy Tech and Vincennes University, a public, two-year liberal arts school with a single campus in a remote corner of the state. Vincennes was to provide the liberal arts, Ivy Tech the technical side of a typical community college curriculum.

Jones promoted the idea, with support from then-Governor Frank O’Bannon and leaders of both legislative houses. But the plan was ill-conceived. At Vincennes, enrollment was falling and faculty members were being laid off. There was no chance that the small school could provide liberal arts instruction all over the state.

But the arranged marriage went ahead, leading to what one Ivy Tech faculty member called five “dark years,” marked by spats over funding, faculty assignments and logistics.

Finally, last year the legislature granted the reluctant spouses a divorce and gave Ivy Tech the community college name and the green light to go it alone.

Jones is philosophical about that failed first try. From his perspective it was better to forge ahead, even against the odds, than to wait until all the wrinkles were ironed out. “We

could have spent 25 years of planning and not gotten where we wanted to go,” he said.

The “new Ivy Tech” has been on such an enrollment roll that it has paced the state’s gains in college students. In 2000, the Commission for Higher Education decided to aim for a total of 30,000 more students in Indiana’s public colleges and universities by 2009. After only four years the state was



Students Amanda Nester, Michelle Engel and Jessica Reed (left to right) work in the laboratory kitchen that is part of the Culinary Arts program at Ivy Tech Community College’s Indianapolis campus.

almost 90 percent of the way toward that goal, with Ivy Tech accounting for the bulk of the increase.

The growth has come from students across the age spectrum. Toward the upper end are those like Steve Ballard, 50, and a career changer. Mindful of the physical toll his work as a builder and remodeler can take, he said, he just couldn’t see himself doing it for the rest of his work life. Anxious to “find something else before it’s too late,” he enrolled in the college’s popular hospitality administration program and is learning to be a baker and pastry chef.

Over the last decade, however, the average age of Ivy Tech students has declined to 25 from 31, as more people like Caitlin Ward, now 21 and expecting her associate’s degree in May, have enrolled. Like her two older brothers, she went straight to Ivy Tech from high school. “It was the only affordable way for all of us to be in college at the same time,” she said.

Jones reads Ivy Tech’s changing demographics as a gain in “kids who wouldn’t have gone to college until they were older. We’re getting them younger, which is much more effective.”

But he is still not satisfied that the state is getting enough of them. “We still believe there are huge numbers of adults and young people who could go to college that are not,” he said, putting the number at 20,000 to 30,000 more who could be enrolled in the next ten years. ♦

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