



VIEWS & VISIONS

A publication of Bowles Rice LLP

Fall 2013



Academic Excellence Increases with Avenues of Opportunity

Dr. Michael T. Benson, President
Eastern Kentucky University

Dr. Michael T. Benson is the 12th president of Eastern Kentucky University, a position he assumed in August 2013.

Dr. Benson has nearly 20 years of administrative experience in higher education, more than a decade of which has been spent as an institutional president.

Prior to his chief executive role at EKU, he was president of Southern Utah University, where he successfully directed the development and implementation of SUU's \$100 million "Future is Rising Campaign."

Dr. Benson is a regular contributor to the *Huffington Post* as a featured blogger on higher education issues. His book, *Harry S. Truman and the Founding of Israel* (Praeger 1997) has been hailed as a landmark work in the area of American foreign policy and the U.S. presidency.

He completed his doctorate in modern Middle Eastern history from the University of Oxford (St. Antony's College). He also earned a master's degree, *cum laude*, from the Mendoza College of Business at the University of Notre Dame in non-profit administration, and a B.A., *cum laude*, from Brigham Young University, with a major in political science and double minor in English and history.

For more than a century, Eastern Kentucky University has been known as a school of opportunity. Typically, this moniker refers to the students who come our way, but it can also mean how the institution shapes its own destiny. I believe in the axiom that an institution is much better judged by the kind of students it graduates, as opposed to the type of students it admits.

In point of fact, the vast majority of our 130,000-plus alumni have come to us from economically disadvantaged surroundings – our primary service region has long included some of the poorest counties in the nation – and gone on to make a positive difference in nearly every profession, whether back in their hometowns or in far-flung corners of the globe.

There are challenges, to be sure, but I believe the class we graduate in 2025 will be a reflection of how well we are taking advantage of the opportunities before us today.

Regardless of their backgrounds, our graduates' success stems from several factors: their own second-to-none work ethic and determination; a nourishing faculty and staff dedicated to each student's progress; and an enduring commitment by Eastern to stay "ahead of the curve" and prepare our students not for the challenges of today, but also for what tomorrow might bring.

It might only be 2013, but we are already laying the groundwork at EKU for the Class of 2025, while committing to our share of an ambitious



goal set by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities: to increase the number of baccalaureate degrees by more than three million nationally between now and 2025.

This is not, however, a numbers game. We cannot and we must not compromise academic quality. To do so would be a grave disservice to our students.

Instead, we will follow several avenues of opportunity at EKU to raise our standard of excellence, attract and graduate more students and make an even bigger difference in the lives of Kentuckians and others:

- First and foremost, even though public higher education is not supported by the state at the level it once was, we must nonetheless continue to be good stewards of the trust placed in us by taxpayers. That means prioritizing the educational experience for our students, reducing their time to degree completion and eliminating waste and duplication.
- We must continue to reach out to minorities and other underrepresented groups, not for the sake of numbers or diversity itself, but to enrich the educational experience of all our students. For example, I announced at our recent Diversity Breakfast that the University will increase its financial commitment to recruit Hispanic students, a growing segment of our population. The University is also making a concerted effort to reach students

who, for some reason, curtailed their college education just short of a baccalaureate degree, as well as convince more two-year college graduates to continue their education.

- We must continue to listen closely to employers and other stakeholders regarding workplace and societal needs. What we most often hear is that our graduates need to be able to think critically and creatively and communicate effectively. Because these skills translate increasingly across every profession and will only grow in demand, Eastern is making a concerted effort to develop these skills in all our students. The linchpin of our intent to change how our students learn is our Noel Studio for Academic Creativity, a unique and remarkable facility for our campus community and the envy of our peers nationwide.
- While the number of college-age students in our primary service region continues to decline, we have the world

literally at our fingertips, thanks to the Internet and online learning. This is the most rapidly growing segment of EKU's student population and we must continue to develop more and more courses – and, in some cases, entire degree programs – for delivery either entirely online or via an online/classroom hybrid. This must be done without sacrificing academic quality or forsaking the more holistic experience of our on-campus students.

- Finally, just as it is critical to keep the cost of a college degree within reach of the average Kentucky family, we must also continually add value to that degree. We do this at EKU by teaching our students how to learn throughout their lives, how to think critically and creatively and then how to persuasively communicate their ideas to others.

It is a great time to be associated with higher education generally and with Eastern Kentucky University specifically.

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The Noel Studio at EKU is staffed by highly trained student employees and offers consultations, workshops, and facilitated peer-review sessions on subjects ranging from integrating creativity into the classroom to writing for the web and conducting academic research