

NEWS

Wabash College greets new president with test to reopen campus during coronavirus pandemic

[Dave Bangert](#) Lafayette Journal & Courier

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CRAWFORDSVILLE – On an afternoon when tables and chairs were transferred from a dining hall to a warehouse in town, prepping for a grab-and-go, socially distanced campus to start to the school year, Scott Feller, still settling in during his first weeks at Wabash College’s 17th president, contemplated what else he might be doing at that moment, if not for an ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

In this case, it meant missing hours of sweating over a grill at the Montgomery County 4-H Fair, flipping lamb patties from livestock raised on a farm he and Wendy, his wife, operate near New Richmond, about a dozen miles north of Wabash College’s brick-lined campus in Crawfordsville.

“This would be the week I would be dragging everybody from my office to the fair for a pork chop sandwich or a lamb burger – they all know that,” Feller said, sitting in his Center Hall office marked with mask requirements and looking out over a campus, nearly empty and quiet even by summer standards.

“Instead, here we are,” Feller said. “So much is different. The fair. The campus. Everything.”

Including the job.

Feller, who came to Wabash College in 1998 as a chemistry professor and had been dean for the past six years, was named Wabash College president in May, the first to come

through the ranks at the all-male liberal arts school since Byron Trippet became president in 1956.

On July 1, he replaced Gregory Hess, who stepped down after being president since 2013 to become CEO of IES Abroad, a study abroad organization. Hess left saying that Feller “has my 100 percent trust and confidence.”

The position came with a built-in assumption that the first job was to navigate coronavirus restrictions, which had already emptied a campus where 100 percent of the 850 students live on the 188-year-old campus just west of downtown Crawfordsville. Feller had already been knee-deep into that as dean, which is the top academic position at Wabash College, similar to that of provost at Purdue University.

Feller has turned to another Wabash connection for that, comparing notes every two weeks or so with David Broecker, who leads the implementation team for the Protect Purdue Plan, the reopening strategy once 40,000-plus students return to the West Lafayette campus. Broecker, chief innovation and collaboration officer for Purdue Research Foundation, is a Wabash graduate and a trustee at the college from 2009 to 2019.

More: How will Purdue reopen in the fall? Here’s the Protect Purdue Plan

“Scott will be a terrific president at Wabash,” Broecker said. “He is the right person at the right time to take Wabash to the next level in these challenging times, not just for COVID, but for a liberal arts college for men in Indiana. The value proposition for Wabash graduates has never been greater.”

Just over two weeks into his new role, Feller called it a “gentle transition” on a campus he’s known since 1998 and is now leading. During an interview with the J&C, here were some of his thoughts about reopening campus, mounting pressures on small liberal arts schools and what’s next for Wabash College.

Reopening under COVID-19

Wabash College will start two weeks earlier than normal, holding its annual ringing in ceremony for new students on Aug. 9 and starting classes Aug. 11. The fall 2020 semester will end two days before Thanksgiving.

Feller said the college spent the spring and summer reconfiguring classrooms and living spaces. He said Wabash College found that the campus was built with room to spare. Construction continues on a \$13 million Little Giants Stadium stadium expected to open for an adjusted 2020 football season, which is still in the works for the Division III school.

More: Coronavirus: Purdue reveals 3 students test positive, accounting for less than 1% of first group on campus

Feller said the campus is prepared to adjust as the semester goes on – “What we know now is different than it was three weeks ago and could be different three weeks from now,” he said – but will lean heavily on Wabash’s “Gentleman’s Rule.” The rule has been Wabash’s long-standing, overarching student conduct guide, stating: “The student is expected to conduct himself at all times, both on and off the campus, as a gentleman and a responsible citizen.”

More: Wabash College starting 2 weeks early, leans into ‘Gentleman’s Rule’ to guide campus reopening

Broecker, dealing with reopening a campus more than 40 times bigger, said part of the inspiration for the Protect Purdue Pledge – a guiding principle that calls on students, faculty and staff to do all they can to follow standards meant to prevent the spread of the virus – came from the call for personal responsibility implied by Wabash’s Gentleman’s Rule.

“We’re going to give our students a chance to demonstrate that they can act responsibly and work within the framework we built here and have a campus where COVID is not impacting the operation,” Feller said.

More: Wabash College making way for new, \$13M Little Giant Stadium, ready for 2020 season

“We’re not such a big place, so I tend to know everyone’s coordinates,” Feller said. “It’s a matter of a small community that makes some communal decisions to wear masks, to physically separate, to monitor their symptoms and to participate in some random COVID testing programs. I’m still bullish that a small group of people committed to a mission can do some things that surprise people.”

What's the future for Wabash College?

Feller said he bought into the direction Hess was taking Wabash College. "You're not going to see much of a pivot," Feller said. Two goals, he said, would try to separate Wabash College from a higher education landscape that has threatened the survival of four-year, liberal arts residential campuses.

First, he said, would be looking at what Indiana and national demographics look like for students who are entering kindergarten now and will be ready for college by the time Wabash turns 200 in 2032.

"We like to say we offer an elite education, but we have not ever been the place that taught the elite," Feller said. Roughly 40 percent of Wabash students are the first in their families going for a bachelor's degree and a range of 18 percent to 20 percent are domestic students of color, he said.

"The demographics of 2032 are certainly different from the students we're teaching now," Feller said. "I think we're well positioned for more of what we call the new majority students – students of color, first generation college students, Pell grant recipients. That's how we're looking to enter our third century."

The second priority, Feller said, will be strengthening Wabash College's financial position. Wabash is \$194 million into a \$225 million Giant Steps fundraising campaign. Feller said that 40 percent of Wabash's living alumni give to the college in any given year, putting \$3 toward the college for every \$1 brought in through tuition. That sort of philanthropy has made it possible to keep enrollment steady.

"We have very loyal alumni and friends, and we need to keep earning that," Feller said. "You hear a lot about schools that are nervous, and they tend to be ones that are more tuition-driven institutions. ... We need to be a model for how you can run a financially feasible, residential liberal arts college. We want to be a small college. We want to be residential. What we're working toward are models that don't require us to scale up and have twice as many students and don't require us to change what Wabash is."

Final thoughts on first days

“I didn’t plan to be president,” said Feller, who insists he’d planned to return to teaching after a stint as dean and get back to research on lipids.

“And I wasn’t looking to be president anywhere else,” Feller said. “But there’s something about Wabash. Just as students tend to, they don’t have to be here very long before they become really committed to the place. The same thing happened to me. So, I’m very committed to the place.”

And if that means starting a presidency when things are, as Feller puts it, “changing by the week, if not by the day?”

“I’ve still been excited to get to work, wouldn’t you know it,” Feller said. “We’re all going to get a measure of ourselves and all figure this out together.”

Reach Dave Bangert at 765-420-5258 or at dbangert@jconline.com. Follow on Twitter: [@davebangert](https://twitter.com/davebangert).