Indiana University in the Light of History

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When I ask students today to describe the distinctive features of Indiana University, they invariably point to three things. First is the beautiful environment of the Bloomington campus, with its verdant landscape and limestone architecture. Second are the people they encounter—not only instructors and support staff but local residents as well—who seem genuinely interested in their welfare. Third is the high academic reputation of IU and the presence of outstanding programs in music, sociology, business, languages, and environmental affairs, to name only a few.

What usually goes unmentioned in this litany of place, people, and programs are the underlying values embodied by Indiana University. The fundamental concepts of educational access and the pursuit of excellence have been continually redefined, through changes in the curriculum and the expansion of extracurricular activities, since the university first opened its doors. In order to appreciate how IU has been shaped over time into the institution we know today, we have to consider the very idea of university education in the light of history.

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Indiana University celebrates its 175th anniversary in 1995. When it was founded in 1820, there were fewer than 65 institutions of higher education in America; now there are more than 2,000. As one of this country’s oldest state universities, IU has grown from a tiny wilderness outpost to a major academic center. This growth echoes familiar themes in the history of American education.

IU has come a long way in nearly two centuries. What began as an idea expressed in a few words in the 1816 constitution of the new state of Indiana slowly took shape in the backwoods settlement of Bloomington after legislation was passed in 1820 for a seminary of learning. Endowed with land and little else, the Indiana State Seminary began operation a few years later with one professor and 13 students. By 1829 it had been renamed Indiana College, acquired a building and a president, and was about to send its first graduates off into the world.

Since the first graduating class of three in 1830, more than 400,000 people have earned diplomas from Indiana University. The vast majority of these alumni are alive today, a testament to the tremendous growth in student enrollment during the past 50 years. In 1995 nearly 15,000 more graduates will join the alumni ranks—matching in a single year the cumulative total of degrees awarded between 1830 and 1930.

I.U. has also grown well beyond the boundaries of its original site. The Bloomington campus was moved to its present location in 1884, and shortly after the turn of the century branches of the university began to be established in various Indiana cities. Today there are seven permanent campuses in addition to Bloomington, putting the university within easy reach of most of the state’s residents.
The early years

The founders of the Indiana State Seminary, themselves part of an educated elite of lawyers, physicians, clergy, and other men of substance, were determined to bring the benefits of education to the frontier. Although it was a secular institution, the nascent school had a strong Christian orientation. In this way church and state, though separate, were harnessed together to the wagon of progress.

After a few years of operation, the school was renamed Indiana College. In 1829 the trustees appointed Andrew Wylie its first president. Wylie, a Presbyterian minister from Pennsylvania, had previously served as president of both Jefferson College and Washington College. Well-suited by background and temperament for the challenges of guiding the new institution, Wylie presided with a firm paternal hand. He planted his roots deeply in Bloomington, building a fine house near the college and raising a dozen children with his wife, Elizabeth.

Under his guidance, the college retained its focus on the classical curriculum as enrollments grew steadily. By 1851, the year of Wylie’s untimely death due to a wood chopping accident, there were 88 students and seven faculty members, professing moral and mental philosophy, languages, natural philosophy, mathematics and civil engineering, law, and polite literature.

The university was located a few blocks south of the center of Bloomington. The site reflected the pioneers’ vision of a civilized opening in the wilderness, a space cleared of its native trees and dedicated to the cultivation of the mind and spirit. At first a single schoolhouse sat within the bare rectangle, to be joined later by more substantial academic buildings. In 1854 the main college hall burned, consuming the 1,200 volume library, but it was soon rebuilt with the aid of donations from local citizens and alumni, who organized ‘the Society of the Alumni’ for the purpose of supporting the college.

The leaders who succeeded Wylie were also men of the cloth, expected to exert moral as well as intellectual authority. These preacher-presidents oversaw the development of the university through the Civil War and after, as the academic community in Bloomington grew to a dozen professors and 150 students by the early 1880s. Women became part of this growing student body after 1867, when IU became one of the nation’s first universities to admit women on the same terms as men.

In 1883 another disastrous fire destroyed Science Hall, a substantial structure built a decade earlier. It contained not only valuable scientific apparatus but also the 12,000 volume library, university records, and faculty papers.

New beginnings

The 1883 fire prompted a search for a new site away from the hustle and bustle of downtown Bloomington. In due course a 20-acre plot on the eastern border of town was purchased from the Dunn family. Two new buildings were planned, and, even though the state failed to appropriate special funds, contracts were let in 1884 for their construction. Wylie Hall and Owen Hall thus formed the nucleus of the new campus and marked the beginning of a crescent of buildings enclosing about 10 acres of the original woods.

As the new campus took shape, it embodied a different vision of a space for learning. In contrast to the Seminary Square site, at Dunn’s Woods much of the existing
landscape was left undisturbed as new buildings were erected and pathways connecting
them were built. Now the forest was seen as an environmental amenity instead of an
obstacle, and it provided a visible link to an earlier era already passed into history.

Although it resulted from a catastrophic fire, the change in location proved in the
long run an enormous stroke of good fortune. It provided the university with room to
expand, unconstrained by the increasingly urban environment of Bloomington, and the
opportunity to develop a distinctive campus identity apart from the city.

The move to the new campus coincided with a momentous change in
administration. David Starr Jordan, professor of zoology, became president on Jan. 1,
1885. Unlike his predecessors, Jordan was a scientist rather than a clergyman, and his
selection marked a watershed in the history of I.U.

With a biologist at the helm, the university adopted a research model that
provided the impetus for introducing the elective system and specialized majors in the
curriculum, as well as creating a departmental structure organized along disciplinary
lines. Although Jordan left IU in 1891 to serve as the first president of Stanford
University, the reforms he championed put the university in step with national trends and
fostered a vigorous culture of research on the campus.

**Into the 20th century**

Jordan was an inspiring teacher and mentor to many students during his dozen
years at IU. By exhortation and by example he induced a number of promising
undergraduates to pursue careers in science.

Among those motivated by Jordan was William Lowe Bryan, who completed his
bachelor’s degree in ancient classics in 1884 and a master’s degree in the history of
philosophy in 1886. Bryan, the son of a local Presbyterian minister, discovered that
science as well as philosophy offered ways to explore questions about human nature. He
became a noted contributor to the emerging field of experimental psychology.

Bryan left his laboratory studies of human learning behind in 1902 when he
began a 35-year term as IU president. His emphasis on the development of the
university’s professional schools was a natural outgrowth of his belief that education
could prepare individuals to find in their occupations personal fulfillment as well as
social usefulness. During his administration the structure of the university took on much
of its present configuration. Schools of medicine, education, nursing, business, music,
and dentistry were established, as well as the Graduate School and the Extension
Division.

Over the long span of Bryan’s presidency, the university grew in nearly every
way. Enrollment increased from less than 800 to nearly 5,000 students, and the number
of faculty rose from 67 to almost 400. The university acquired dozens of acres, and the
campus sprouted several academic halls and the first student dormitories, along with
major new structures such as the library, the fieldhouse, and the Indiana Memorial
Union. Through the Extension Division the university expanded its reach beyond
Bloomington. Courses were offered at extensions in several urban centers around the
state. By the time Bryan retired at the age of 76, the university had significantly
broadened access to its programs and dramatically increased the quality of graduate and
professional education.
A great leap forward

Bryan’s replacement was the young dean of the IU business school, Herman B Wells, an economist by training and a specialist in institutional finance. A native Hoosier and an IU alumnus, he was formally inaugurated on Dec. 1, 1938. Shrewd, charming, and energetic, Wells was prepared to use the impressive achievements of the Bryan era as a springboard for a great leap forward.

Wells had high expectations for all of those concerned with the welfare of IU, including himself. Relentless in his quest to make the university better, he was remarkably successful at enlisting supporters to the cause. His vision of Indiana as a great university was pragmatic rather than utopian. He knew that academic quality depended on creating conditions where individuals could learn and grow and thereby fulfill their potential. People were his passion, and he cultivated contacts with all members of the university community. Exuding a comfortable charisma, he was able to count naive freshman, nostalgic alumni, unsung secretaries, wealthy benefactors, skeptical legislators, local citizens, harried faculty, and many others as his friends and colleagues.

Wells possessed the instincts of a natural executive. When federal aid to higher education expanded because of World War II, he took advantage of the largesse to strengthen the university’s programs in foreign languages and international affairs. Likewise, government funds for scientific research helped to bolster initiatives in nuclear physics, genetics, psychology, and other areas. Wells was a master at leveraging limited resources by selecting certain subjects for strategic investment. Instead of supporting every conceivable program across the board, he emphasized certain fields of study where IU could achieve a competitive advantage, such as linguistics, folklore, area studies, and history and philosophy of science.

Although Wells maintained the university’s focus on research and advanced training, he made an extraordinary effort to cultivate the arts as well. A firm believer in the arts as an integral part of liberal education, he sought to increase students’ exposure to the visual and performing arts. Offerings in music, fine arts, and theater and drama expanded greatly as IU became more than a training ground for arts educators. With the help of a faculty drawn from the nonacademic world of art, talented students could develop their artistic creativity and performance skills.

The G.I. Bill helped to fuel burgeoning enrollments. Between 1946 and 1947 the student population doubled to 10,000, and growth continued for the next two decades. To accommodate this growth, the university committed itself to a major building program. In addition to the expansion of classroom, library, and laboratory facilities, several new dormitories were built, including a residence hall for graduate students. A notable legacy of the Wells era was the Fine Arts Plaza, with the Auditorium, the School of Fine Arts, and the Lilly Library surrounding the Showalter Fountain.

The momentum generated during his administration continued after Wells stepped down in 1962 after 25 years as president. Enrollment on the Bloomington campus finally reached a plateau of 30,000 students around 1970, while the other IU campuses continued their growth.

Beyond Bloomington
As student unrest grew in the 1960s, a quiet revolution was taking place in the basic structure of the university. The campuses scattered around the state gained increasing autonomy. Growing enrollments coupled with additional state funds led to expanded programs at the former extension units. By 1971, when John W. Ryan was inaugurated as IU’s 14th president, baccalaureate degrees were being granted at Indianapolis, Fort Wayne, South Bend, Northwest (Gary), Southeast (first at Jeffersonville, then at New Albany), and Kokomo -- though East (Richmond) would have to wait until 1986 for four-year programs to be authorized.

Ryan, who had been in charge of regional campus development before becoming president, directed a major administrative reorganization in 1974 that created a statewide system of eight campuses. Although Bloomington remained the single largest campus by far, its growth had reached a plateau. In contrast, the other campuses were burgeoning, and their combined enrollments soon surpassed Bloomington’s and changed the university’s demographic profile.

The typical student was no longer between 18 and 22 years of age, pursuing a degree full time in the context of a residential campus. More students were now older, returning to school after periods of employment, childbearing, and other significant life experiences. Many attended IU part-time and commuted to campus. Members of this “new majority” often had needs different from those of the traditional college student, and IUPUI and the regional campuses evolved to serve this growing constituency.

The commitment to “one university with eight front doors” was affirmed by Thomas Ehrlich, IU’s president from 1987 to 1994. As the opportunities and challenges posed by the multicampus system are worked out in the ensuing years, the growth of IU beyond Bloomington may be considered as significant as the founding of the university in 1820 or the move to Dunn’s Woods in 1884.

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Like any complex and dynamic institution, Indiana University defies easy summation. In the light of history, however, we can discern significant patterns in the changing panorama of events and personalities that have shaped the university. The ideals of liberal culture, research, and professional education have been embodied in IU’s development from a pioneer state college to a major academic center known throughout the world. Looking back at the rich legacy of the past, we celebrate the spirit that has sustained Indiana University for 175 years.