

Woman's Intuition

Three women college leaders discuss how their respective Ohio colleges are faring in the economy, leadership and what tops their presidential agendas these days.

BY HILARY HURD ANYASO



From left: Wilberforce University President Patricia L. Hardaway, James A. Rhodes State College President Dr. Debra L. McCurdy, Cuyahoga Community College President Dr. Jerry Sue Thornton

**Patricia L. Hardaway, president,
Wilberforce University, Wilberforce**

Patricia L. Hardaway was appointed president of Wilberforce University in April 2008. An attorney and graduate of the historically Black university, Hardaway and her administrative team are focusing much of their attention on student retention, and they're seeing positive results. This spring semester's student enrollment is equal to the enrollment last fall. "It took work from every part of the university to hold retention and to create a situation where we don't have a net loss between the first and the second term," says Hardaway.

DI: How does it feel to be president of your alma mater?

PH: It's a humbling feeling because you don't necessarily plan to be the president of your alma mater when you're a student. It's really an honor to be selected. It provides an opportunity to create a vision for the university's growth.

DI: What aspects of the job as a university president have required the steepest learning curve?

PH: What this position has done has required and enabled me to use all of the skills and capacities that I've developed over the course of my professional life. The steepest area has been in getting the financial underpinnings of the university to a place where we are moving ahead with bringing financial strength to the university — attracting and bringing resources to the university that will support our programs and allow us to enhance what we do and grow what we do. I think that's a challenge for every college president.

DI: What items on your presidential agenda are getting the most attention these days?

PH: That would include our academic areas to ensure that we are providing what we say we are providing and developing ways to assess and review what we do to make sure that we're on point. We have been seeing a steady increase and stabilization in our (student) retention. We're pleased about that, but that comes as a result of focused attention to all those things that feed into retention — what we offer, how we offer it, our support services (and) our attention to determining whether a student is falling [through the cracks].

DI: As president of the oldest, private historically Black university, how do you respond to those who question the relevancy of HBCUs?

PH: Historically Black colleges account for a disproportionate share of African-Americans in graduate and Ph.D. programs. For as small as we are, we are the lion's share resource for that. So that in and of itself says that we are relevant. The other thing that we do that the other schools don't is that we accept the valedictorian of the class as well as the potential scholar. And on graduation day they are both fully equipped to move into the larger society as educated men and women. That's certainly something that most of the majority colleges don't do.

DI: What would people be surprised to learn about Wilberforce?

PH: We are a primary source of talent in the work force, locally and around the country, as a result of our co-operative education program that is part of the academic experience. Every student must complete two co-op experiences as requirements for graduation.

tion. So our students are head and shoulders above many students because of their experiences as professionals in the work force. In addition, we graduated in the last couple of years 75 percent of the African-American electrical engineers in the state of Ohio. That, I know, is not a well-known fact.

**Dr. Debra L. McCurdy, president,
James A. Rhodes State College, Lima**

Dr. Debra McCurdy is presiding over a college that has experienced significant enrollment growth since she arrived in 2006. She attributes that growth to the college's outreach efforts and the economy. While the growth is welcome, the need for increased funding is an ongoing challenge at the two-year college. In addition to increased enrollment, McCurdy sees a shift occurring within the culture of community colleges. "Students today are looking for something different than just the revolving door of two-year institutions. They are really looking for the collegiate experience."

DI: How is Rhodes State feeling the effects of the economy?

DM: Many individuals have been feeling the effects of so many of the plant closings here. We're seeing an increase in the adult population and certainly in (military) veterans. We're also seeing an increase in students coming directly from high school and so the effects that we're seeing (are increases) in numbers. I arrived in 2006 and three and a half years later we've gone from 3,000 students to a little over 4,100 students. This is a time, unfortunately, for many people to look at new careers. And we're the best place and the front door for offering individuals in the community new opportunities at careers and career development.

DI: What items on your presidential agenda are getting the most attention these days?

DM: That's a long list! The economy — we hope to put people back to work, but we're being victimized by budget cuts at all levels. Also, the tremendous increase in enrollment and ensuring that we have the capacity to serve the numbers (of students) that need to be served. We've always as a two-year institution served and had adult populations but we're now seeing adults come back in even larger numbers. So how do we ensure we have all the services and the person power to manage the need for people coming back after years of being out and may need more developmental and beginning coursework before we can get them into certificate programs and on a career track?

DI: Is there anything in particular that keeps you up at night as it pertains to the college?

DM: I think it's funding. Until we can bring budgets and opportunities for funding in line with what our four-year counterparts and peers have been able to acquire and at least compete for, that still continues to put us at a disadvantage. So the funding development area is uncharted waters for many two-year institutions, and certainly for my own, as we begin to look at new funding opportunities outside of tuition and fees and the state dollars.

DI: What professional advice do you have for women in the college/university president pipeline?

DM: The mentorship is critical. I would never have made the progress I've made in my professional career without having strong and effective leadership who allowed me that privilege of working

closely with them to understand that dynamic of being a leader. Also, you have to have courage. These jobs are not for the (faint-hearted).

DI: What exciting project is coming down the pike for the college that you're looking forward to?

DM: A Center of Excellence for Health Sciences — that's going to be an exciting project that will hopefully draw on a relationship with the hospitals and health entities, as well as the state. I think it will be a regional platform for careers in health sciences and training and a mantelpiece for this institution to develop a fully simulated facility for training and career development and for academic programs, ultimately responding to the health care and work-force needs of the community.

**Dr. Jerry Sue Thornton, president,
Cuyahoga Community College, Cleveland**

Dr. Jerry Sue Thornton heads the largest and the oldest community college in Ohio. Tri-C, as Cuyahoga is also known, is experiencing tremendous student growth, hitting a record-high enrollment last year of more than 30,000 students across its three campuses. The diversity of students from adult learners to recent high school graduates has Thornton and her administration focusing the college's resources on broad initiatives — from its honors program to its developmental education program. "We're asked to do more with fewer resources," says Thornton. "And that is usually the cycle of community colleges."

DI: How is Cuyahoga feeling the effects of the economy?

JT: We hit our record high last fall of students for the first time. College-credit students (reached) 30,268. We've been most proud

universities. And lastly, more reverse transfers. In the reverse transfers, not only are local students coming from the university to us, but international students who have come (to the U.S.) to attend universities and found that the affordability just wasn't there for them.

DI: What items on your presidential agenda are getting the most attention these days?

JT: Championing and leading student success measures. We have goals for increasing our graduation rate and awarding certificates for work-force training. We have incorporated those into our college goals and strategic planning. Also, I would say fundraising takes up a lot of time for me. I created a strong foundation when I came here 18 years ago. We had a foundation that accepted dollars donated and said "Thank you very much" and sent out letters of appreciation. We have turned that foundation into a much more aggressive foundation where we are outreaching to people of wealth, to corporations, to foundations (and) to the federal government.

DI: The average tenure of a college president is between five and 10 years. To what do you attribute your longevity?

JT: Part of it is staying focused laser-like on the mission of the college — developing a vision and a strategy to meet that mission; establishing a great working relationship with the board of trustees where we're very clear on what each other does. I'm very fortunate that I've had a good board over these 18 years and an understanding of how to work with renegade board members, because you're going to have them. Also, positioning the college in the community serves me well. I have community people who are supportive of my leadership, supportive of me and have been there through some challenging times for me.



Dr. Jerry Sue Thornton (left) considers developing a strategy to meet Cuyahoga's mission and establishing a working relationship with the board of trustees as keys to the longevity of her presidency at the Cleveland-based community college.

of the college-credit students and the increase there. We have dislocated workers like most community colleges and (more than) 670 veterans, young men and women who have come back from Iraq and Afghanistan. We also are experiencing more women coming back who are re-entering the work force and then recent high school graduates who are experiencing the increase of tuition at

DI: What professional advice do you have for women in the college/university president pipeline?

JT: I do a lot of work with people who are in the pipeline. I do that through the ACE (American Council on Education) fellows program and I do it through the university programs. A lot of what I talk about with people, who aspire to be a president, is preparing for the leadership opportunity. [One has to] understand the role of the president vs. the board and subverting your own ego. I think sometimes that's where people run amok in leadership, when pride and ego take over. This (college) is bigger than me; this is going to be here long after I'm gone.

DI: Share an exciting project or event that's coming down the pike for the college that you're looking forward to.

JT: We worked with the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame to get (it) to locate (its) archives and library on our metropolitan campus. So we have a brand new building. Together, we're going to have a "wow" opening in September for our new Center for Creative Arts at Cuyahoga Community College and in the same building (there's) the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum's archives and library. That's going to be a fun thing. ■

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