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WKU's new provost outlines priorities

By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com Aug 4, 2018

Western Kentucky University's new provost Terry Ballman poses for a portrait Wednesday, August 1, 2018, at Wetherby Administration Building.

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It seemed like the opportunity of a lifetime when Terry Ballman was offered the job as Western Kentucky University's new provost and vice president for academic affairs.

Things were falling into place for Ballman when she was contacted by a search firm working for WKU.

In her fifth year as dean of the College of Arts and Letters at California State University, San Bernardino, she'd just received a successful performance review, and her two sons were becoming more independent. After she was told about the vacancy, she did her research and applied.

"I met the president, the search committee. I was just very excited," she said in an interview Wednesday, her first day on the job. "Coming to the beautiful campus, it was just wonderful. This is like a dream come true to me."

After more than 30 years in higher education, “I very much believe in the mission of serving students, transforming lives, making a difference in the region,” Ballman said. Her long experience as a faculty member and dean have given her a deep understanding of the work faculty do and the importance everyone plays in the institution, she said.

“At the end of the day, it’s about serving students well,” she said.

Ballman had been at California State University, San Bernardino, since 2013. She also served at the university’s Channel Islands location, which was a new campus. She received her doctorate in Hispanic linguistics from the University of Texas at Austin, a master’s degree in Latin American literature from California State University, Long Beach, and a bachelor’s degree in Spanish and German from CSULB, according to a news release.

Prior to her time working at California State, she was the department head of modern foreign languages at Western Carolina University from 1998 to 2002, according to her curriculum vitae.

She’s also held jobs at the University of Northern Colorado (1993-1998), California State University, Long Beach (1988-1992) and Binghamton University in New York (1985-1987).

In Ballman’s experience, “some of the best ideas in any university come from faculty.”

“Oftentimes, faculty are very busy people so you need to give them opportunities to discuss ideas and brainstorm and come up with some fantastic things,” she said.

Ballman adopted that approach during her time as a dean at California State University. Working with another dean, she listened to business college faculty concerned that students weren’t getting enough practice with presentation skills and creativity. She worked to create partnerships with the College of Arts and Letters’ communication and theater and arts departments to fix the problem.

“I’m proud of being able to help that conversation take place,” she said.

In another leadership role, she convened a task force of faculty and staff in the College of Arts and Letters to map out its priorities and values. The result was a greater focus on working across disciplines, more project-based learning and different kinds of pedagogy techniques.

Strategic planning isn't new to Ballman. She was involved in a similar process when California State University opened its new campus at the Channel Islands.

After reviewing WKU's strategic plan, Ballman said she's excited for what's next.

"I think that's really exciting, because that oftentimes sets what the objectives or the goals are for the institution, how do we achieve those goals, what are the metrics for those," she said. "That will help identify what I will be doing in my role."

When it comes to WKU's challenge in attracting and retaining students, Ballman said the university isn't alone. Many universities across the country are facing the same situation with fewer college-age students available to recruit, she said.

"Oftentimes, students just need more time to develop a group of friends," and to form a support network, Ballman said.

"My impression, too, is that WKU has an incredible alumni base," she added, suggesting they could be ambassadors for new students.

When asked about how to prioritize faculty compensation, Ballman said they need to feel valued.

"We have to always remember to champion the good work of the faculty," she said.

"Everybody can make a difference in a student's life ... but the people with whom students particularly bond is our faculty.



“If you do great work, then it follows that you deserve to be compensated fairly,” she said.

Responding to the staffing reductions and budget cuts WKU experienced in the spring, Ballman said she was sorry for those who had lost jobs. In her brief time in Bowling Green, she’s already seen how highly the community thinks of WKU. Community members appreciate steps taken to put the university on better financial footing, she said.

As for an upcoming program review process called for in WKU’s strategic plan, Ballman described it as an opportunity.

“I think comprehensive program review might afford us an opportunity to make sure that certain programs, if they haven’t been funded appropriately, get more funding,” she said, adding it could also help other programs become more productive.

The process for program review is still being decided, Ballman said.

Ballman plans to learn more about WKU’s new budget model, but said it should reward programs that mentor students and help them grow, not just the largest programs.

“That has to count for something, too,” she said. “However the model is developed, it has to account for those who have kind of high impact practice-type relationships with students. I think that really means something.”

Overall, Ballman said she likes to see problems as “challenges and opportunities.”

As she settles into her new role, she looks forward to getting to know Bowling Green and the friendly people she’s met.

“It’s really nice,” she said. “It’s just a wonderful community. I’m just thrilled to be here.”

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