PROFILE: DR. RICHARD HELLDOBLER, William Paterson University President

September 2018

Dr. Richard Helldobler, William Paterson University’s president as of July 1, 2018, does more than talk about the significance of an “affordable” and “accessible” higher education. He feels it in his core.

“William Paterson’s mission speaks to my own life’s experience. My father immigrated to this country from Germany. I was the first one in my family to be able to attend a university (neither of his parents attended nor did any of his siblings graduate college). My appreciation of how education can change your life will last my entire life. The experience of many William Paterson students mirrors my own experience, and it is thrilling to help them succeed. William Paterson is changing the social fabric of our region and the country. And that fact made this job so attractive to me,” said the university’s eighth president, when asked why he is so enthusiastic about his new job in academia.

During the early days of his administration, President Helldobler has focused on what he called “William Paterson 101 – a series of campus meetings with faculty, staff, administrators – each one of them crucial to the successful implementation of the university’s goals. “Continuing our momentum requires a collaborative effort built on expertise, commitment, and creative ideas,” he said. “These meetings will help shape strategy and planning.” He admitted, however, that he is listening to his colleagues in the context of certain immutable principles – student success, affordability, and accessibility for students of all socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds.

In addition to reaching out to William Paterson’s community and NJ higher education leaders from all sectors (senior private, senior public, research, community college), he is connecting with state and local governing officials, as well as leaders in the business community. His desire is to explore a variety of win-win partnerships and to reinforce the important role the university plays in the economic health of the state and local communities by being responsive to business and societal needs.

“For example, we must be prepared to align our curricula with industry needs. Different businesses have different workforce priorities. Some corporations are positioned to do their own in-house training and instead are seeking critical thinking and analytical skills (soft skills) from their potential employees. Other corporations may not have the resources to do their other training and look to the universities for job-specific workforce skills, as well as
some of the soft skills. We need to be as nimble as possible and always be listening and learning,” said President Helldobler.

“It is not only an exciting time for me, but also an exciting time within the community of public higher education institutions. We have three new presidents among the public institutions and a new governor and secretary of higher education,” he said. President Helldobler appreciates the need for and hopes to provide input into the governor’s initiative to create a New Jersey higher education master plan. And he noted how honored he was when Governor Murphy called him to offer his congratulations on the day that Dr. Helldobler was appointed.

Dr. Helldobler, who had been interim president of Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago, Illinois, for nearly two years, has shown how “committed he has been to public higher education and to the academic and personal achievements of students,” said Fred Gruel, chair of the William Paterson University Board of Trustees. “He has a strong background as an academician, having served as a faculty member, dean, academic vice president, and president, and we are delighted that he will be bringing his expertise and leadership to William Paterson University.”

During his tenure at Northeastern Illinois University, he led a successful capital campaign, the College of Business and Management earned accreditation from the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), and Northeastern Illinois University’s accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission was reaffirmed for a 10-year period. Prior to his appointment as interim president, he served as provost and vice president for academic affairs; in this position, he oversaw all matters related to academics, including the four colleges, the library, admissions, recruitment, and other areas.

Prior to his appointments at Northeastern Illinois University, he served as vice president for academic affairs at Shepherd University in West Virginia from 2009 to 2012, as well as associate provost/associate vice president for academic affairs at California University of Pennsylvania from 2006 to 2009. Dr. Helldobler joined California University of Pennsylvania in 1988, where he was a faculty member and chair of the Department of Theatre and Dance from 1990 to 2000, as well as interim dean and dean of the College of Liberal Arts from 2000 to 2006. Dr. Helldobler earned his PhD and master of arts in theater from Bowling Green State University and a bachelor's degree in business administration from the University of Toledo.

As president of William Paterson University, Dr. Helldobler leads an institution with 10,000 undergraduate and graduate students. A leading comprehensive public university in New Jersey, William Paterson offers 52 undergraduate and 47 graduate programs, including two doctoral degrees, through five colleges: Arts and Communication, the Cotsakos College of Business, Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, and Science and Health. Among the university’s faculty are 41 Fulbright Scholars and recipients of numerous other awards,
grants, and fellowships. Students benefit from individualized attention from faculty mentors, small class sizes, and numerous research, internship, and clinical experiences.

The university’s immediate past president, Dr. Kathleen Waldron, led significant strategic initiatives that enhanced academics and infrastructure. She guided the development of the university’s Strategic Plan 2012-2022, led William Paterson to increase its academic offerings, including the launch of its second doctoral program, the doctor of psychology, and saw the university designated a Hispanic-serving institution. During her administration, the university also launched an extensive building and renovation project that has transformed the academic facilities at the core of the campus. She also led university efforts to expand initiatives to provide students with opportunities beyond the classroom, including increased offerings for student participation in civic engagement opportunities, an enhanced focus on active involvement by undergraduate students in research and other scholarly and creative activities with faculty, and the implementation of enhanced career development support for students, including the establishment of the Pesce Family Mentoring Institute.

President Helldobler noted that Dr. Waldron initiated many significant and laudable programs and policies, and he now looks forward to building upon them. He knows that his William Paterson listening-and-learning regimen is a long-term commitment, extending throughout his tenure as president.