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FEATURED

TOP STORY

Landgraf excited for new challenge as college president

By DANIEL DIVILIO ddivilio@thekentcountynews.com 2 hrs ago



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While he will not officially take over as Washington College's president until July 1, Kurt Landgraf has been working on campus since the beginning of the month.

CHESTERTOWN — A career disappointment — and not the time he didn't get picked by a professional baseball team — and a couple of longtime friends helped steer Kurt Landgraf onto the path of becoming Washington College's new president.

In an interview June 15, his 15th day on campus, President-elect Landgraf spoke about his previous careers, first as an executive with DuPont, then as the head of Educational Testing Service, and what

attracted him to the historic liberal arts college in Chestertown.

Landgraf, 70, is set to officially succeed President Sheila Bair July 1. Bair, a former chairman of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp., announced her resignation at the beginning of the month, citing time spent away from her family and the hardship that created.

The day after Bair's announcement, the Board of Visitors and Governors named Landgraf her successor. It was noted that Landgraf was a top contender for the position when Bair was hired in 2015.

"I was part of the search two years ago. I was asked, by a person I've known for 40 years who's on the board of governors, here and I came up and fell in love with the student-centric approach," Landgraf said, adding that he has a strong interest in liberal arts.

In 1968, Landgraf graduated from Wagner College, a liberal arts school on New York's Staten Island. His time there was transformative.

"It changed my life, literally, not figuratively. I was a kid who grew up in an orphanage and I never thought of myself as being college material. And I luckily got into a little liberal arts school on an athletic scholarship and I had a professor there and he changed my life," he said.

That athletic scholarship was for baseball. Landgraf was a pitcher, but not destined for the majors.

"I actually had a tryout with the Reading Phillies in 1964," Landgraf said. "I was a failure at age 17. I got sent home."

As the news release announcing Landgraf's hiring states, he has a "decades-long résumé as a senior executive with DuPont" before becoming the head of ETS, which bills itself as "the world's largest private nonprofit educational testing and assessment organization." He also was a chairman of the New Jersey Commission on Higher Education.

So how did he shift from DuPont to education?

"I will tell you the 100 percent actual truth and that is that I was one of two candidates to become chairman of the board of the DuPont Co. And the DuPont board elected the other candidate. And in the world, the commercial world, when you're the non-electee, you leave. And I did," he said.

Landgraf said he was taking a couple of months off to recuperate from all of that, when a lifelong friend who was then the ETS chairman reached out to him.

"And he called me and told me that he would like me to consider taking over the Educational Testing Service because it needed to be liquidated. It was in very bad shape. And I told him, 'As it happens, I am ready for another challenge.' And I thought I was going to be there six months and I ended up staying 14 years. And I loved it. And I loved the educational experience and I learned a great deal because I became vice chairman and then chairman of the New Jersey Commission on Higher Education," Landgraf said.

"It's like many things in life. It would seem to me like the worst thing that ever happened to me, not becoming chairman of the DuPont Co., turned out to be one of the finest things that ever happened to me," he said.

It was another longtime friend, a member of Washington College's board, who later sought to bring Landgraf out of his retirement in Lewes, Del.

"Retired is maybe a bit of an exaggeration. I'm on the board of Corning. I'm on the board of Louisiana-Pacific. I was on the board of Course Hero. I was on the board of Remedy Pharmaceuticals. I was on the board of Christiana Care Health (System). I had plenty to do. It's not like having the fantastic challenge that I now have. I'm real happy to be here," he said. "I just want to say I'm really excited about this opportunity. I wanted it for two years. And when it became available, it took me 5 nanoseconds to say 'yes.'"

Landgraf said the board reached out to him again this year, "upon reopening the search" for a president. He said he was viewed as the "No. 2 candidate" two years ago, and the board was happy to hear he was still available and interested.

"Luckily, I got the job," he said.

And what is the role of the college president, as Landgraf sees it?

"The role of a president is constituency management. And so my constituencies include the board, the faculty, the students, Chestertown, the alumni, donors. It is a very complex position," he said. "It's a 24/7 job that requires you to prioritize, but you need to recognize where this school is and manage all of those constituencies to come out with a positive outcome."

Board members have given Landgraf some idea of what they are looking for from him: "viability, stability, maintaining and honoring the programs that President Bair put into place" to name a few.

Bair made college affordability the cornerstone of her presidency, with four focal initiatives. Fixed4Four freezes tuition rates for freshmen over the course of their four years at the college. The Saver's Scholarship offers matching funds for families paying for college with money set aside in dedicated accounts. Dam the Debt helps students pay off loans. George's Brigade provides full rides to low-income, high-achieving students.

"I believe that they are looking to see this college grow. And they're very interested in seeing us receive an even higher ranking in the U.S. News and World Report," Landgraf said.

Landgraf thinks it is great that Washington College made the top 100 of the magazine's rankings. He said it is not necessarily that number itself board members care about, but the components that comprise it such as graduation rates, attrition rates and the number of students who go on to graduate school.

"All those things are a marker for a school like Washington College. So they've been very eager to see the school continue on its mission and have someone help grow the school. That's what I want to do, too," Landgraf said.

As for Bair, Landgraf has met with her and offered nothing but compliments. He said she is being helpful with the transition and that they have jointly met with college staff.

"She's very professional. I have a huge amount of respect for her. I have since my time watching her at the FDIC. She's been extraordinarily professional. She's been extraordinarily positive about helping through this transition. There has not been a single incidence of any kind that I felt anything but full support from her," Landgraf said.

While Bair still occupies the Hynson-Ringgold House— the president's manor — on Chestertown's Water Street, Landgraf is living in the college's guesthouse — the Brown Cottage — on Campus Avenue.

Landgraf's wife, Rita Landgraf, is a professor at the University of Delaware. She previously served

nine years as the First State's secretary of health and social services under Gov. Jack Markell. The couple currently owns two homes, in Lewes and in Wilmington, Del.

Kurt Landgraf plans to move to Chestertown. He said his wife intends "to be here as often as possible and be a part of the community."

"And it's my intention to stay here as long as my health and my vitality and my stability allow," Kurt Landgraf said.