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10 Minutes with Nancy Zimpher

Premium content from The Business Review by Pam Allen, Reporter
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[Nancy Zimpher](#) has a long string of firsts. She was the first woman chancellor at the [University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee](#). She was the first woman president at the [University of Cincinnati](#) in Ohio, where she moved the school into the Big East

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Conference. Two years later, she salvaged the less-than-stellar reputation of Cincinnati's athletics department. Zimpher's latest distinction: She is the first woman chancellor of the 64-campus [State University of New York](#), the largest university system in the country.

You started your chancellorship at SUNY by visiting every college.

One thing that's been very important to me from the very beginning is being on those campuses. I started traveling when I arrived on June 1 in 2008. I returned home on Labor Day. We spent a half a day on each campus.

When you're there for four hours or so, you're able to meet everybody—the faculty, the staff, the students, alumni, corporate and social services leaders. I spent time one-on-one with every president, met with every college council. I really got a lot done in four hours.

Certainly a stark difference from your first teaching job in a tiny schoolhouse in the Ozarks.

It was the early '70s and I found myself in Rolla, Missouri, needing a job. I had just completed my master's in English and had a teaching degree in English education. I was looking for a teaching appointment and the one opening was to co-teach in this one-room school.

Actually, it was two rooms, right?

It had this manual garage door down the middle to separate the classes. This saint-like woman taught grades one through four and I taught grades five through eight. Regularly we would raise the doors and teach all eight grades together.

They were children of really poor families. The kids brought a quarter every Friday to pay for lunches. That's where I learned to cook to scale. We made [Johnny Marzetti](#), chili and fried chicken, beans and wieners, macaroni and cheese, in these big vats that we cooked on a hot plate.

How long were you there?



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The chancellor says eventually she will get back to watercolor painting.

"When I do find the time, I will paint New York. I have never seen a more beautiful landscape. I have seen what the Hudson River Valley, Finger Lakes, Adirondacks, Catskills have to offer."

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One year.

What happened?

They closed all the one-room schools. I hope I didn't contribute to that.

Where did you grow up?

In Gallipolis in southeastern Ohio, which is a part of the Appalachian community. It had a population of about 10,000.

I have a brother and a sister. I'm the youngest. My mother was a teacher in my high school, and boy, does that impact how you behave in high school.

She actually met my father in West Virginia. He was the first of 14 children born to very poor family. He got educated and became an elementary school principal.

He met my mother, a new teacher, in the little town of Herndon, West Virginia, when she got off the train to be a secondary teacher there.

She taught commercial and business skills to prospective secretaries, which at the time were all women.

How did you meet your husband, Ken?

We were both very involved in how you prepare educators. He and I were part of an eight-year study on how to improve teacher education. That resulted in us ultimately getting married. We also published the research from the study.

We've been married 25 years.

Take me through a day in the life of Chancellor [Nancy Zimpher](#).

I was here at seven today. And I have something every hour. Tonight I speak at the United Way of the Greater Capital Region. Tuesday I speak at the Fashion Institute of Technology and Wednesday I'm speaking at a dinner for community leaders in Atlanta. Thursday night I am hosting colleagues from the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee in New York City. Friday night I'm going to Oswego to meet with university faculty. Frankly, that's a pretty typical week.

What do you do when you're not working?

I have a ton of interests outside of this job. I just don't do any of them. My most cherished avocation is watercolor. I would do it every day if I could. I paint, but now I only paint on occasion. My most recent painting was for my son and daughter-in-law when they got married. That's been a year and a half.

When I do find the time, I will paint New York. I have never seen a more beautiful landscape.

I also have a number of instruments I know how to play, from the piano to the guitar to the

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dulcimer. But I don't do those very often.

You're in a bookstore. What's your first stop?

I'm a self-help kind of person. I go to how to make me better, how to make this organization better. I'm a big fan of change literature and organizational development literature.

My favorite author right now is [Jim Collins](#). One of his most well-known books is "Good to Great." I have used his lessons on how to make organizations more effective for a couple of decades. I like to read things that give you insight into what makes people tick.

On the personal side, I look to how could you be healthier, how could you have an exercise program, be a better cook, be a better gardener.

I have a dozen how-to books on watercolor because I'm interested. I want to know how to do it better.

Any stand-out?

I have one favorite teeny, tiny book, "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten," by [Robert Fulghum](#).

I have used that as the basis for commencement addresses, for eulogies, for birthday parties. It's just so fundamental, like when you cross the street, hold hands. Take a nap in the afternoon. Put your toys back. I mean, what could be more basic?

You fired [Bob Huggins](#), the winningest basketball coach in school history, in 2005 when you were president of the University of Cincinnati. It was shortly after Huggins was convicted for drunk driving, and the team produced a zero-percent graduation rate. Was that the hardest professional decision you ever made?

Nope. It wasn't easy. But it definitely wasn't the hardest. People think that something as contentious as that must have been terribly hard. But I've had a lot harder personnel decisions I've had to make, or decisions about funding our work or the future of the university.

Are you a sports fan?

I was 30 years at Ohio State. I'm a big Buckeye. At Cincinnati, I was a Bearcat. And I've played a leadership role at the [NCAA](#) for years. The notion that you make tough athletic decisions because you don't like athletics is simply not true.

I do like athletics and I really appreciate the role athletics play on a college campus. I also have to say that the word "student-athlete" is critically important. You are both a student and an athlete.

And so the issues at Cincinnati hinged on making sure our great athletes were also great students, and that they were graduating.

It ended up being an issue of character.

Of course, there wound up being disagreements about the judgment call, and about the process.

Fans get upset when you mess with their college sports. Did you get lots of feedback?

Mostly in grocery stores. I knew when someone wanted to say something to me, so I would usually start the conversation by saying, friend or foe? It broke the tension and allowed people to say to me what they wanted to say.

Either they didn't like the way the decision was made, or they didn't like the decision at all, or they were worried about the future of athletics at the university. And I understand that.

I accepted fully that it's a big deal.

Eight months after you were sworn in as SUNY chancellor, you ran into another sports controversy. An audit of [Binghamton University's](#) athletic department that you ordered showed that admissions standards were lowered and grades were changed for some of the basketball team's star players. The audit led to the university president retiring, the athletic director resigning and the basketball coach was stripped of his duties.

My role there was different.

The relationship I have with the campuses is that they have their destiny and they should be masters of their destiny. But if there's an issue about performance or some problem, then my role as chancellor is to see that that problem or issue gets fully vetted.

The final outcome was that Binghamton made the right decisions.

What pushes your buttons?

I need to preface this by saying there's a system that measures personality called the Myers-Briggs, and it's a pretty familiar instrument.

What it tries to explain to you is that not everyone thinks the way you do, and that does not mean they are from some planet in the stratosphere. There are people who think differently.

I would say the assessment increased my patience for personal disagreements or professional arguments to say, you know what? You're not stupid. You really just think differently about this issue. So, I guess I really do need to take great care to listen better and be more understanding.

To answer your question, I think what pushes my buttons is people who think differently than me. But I'm working on it.

What is your relationship with [Alain Kaloyeros](#), the bigger-than-life visionary who heads up UAlbany Nanotech college?

It's fun. We both have big jobs. And probably big egos. Therefore, it might seem to other

people that it's a hard relationship. But I think Alain and our nanoscience college are such an asset. I couldn't be happier to offer praise and encouragement. And I think he feels the same way. He really is one of a kind and we're lucky to have him in our community.

What would people be surprised to learn about you?

That I have as much fun on my job as I do. I love to laugh. I think I have a relatively quick wit. I enjoy other people who are funny and don't take themselves so darn seriously. So, if we aren't having fun doing this really hard job, then there's something wrong with us.

What's the biggest challenge for higher education moving forward?

I think it's continuing to add value. We only work if people understand the value of a college degree. And in a changing world where a lot of knowledge is delivered digitally, we have to be real players in that world.

We have to make sure our students get a full education, get graduated and go on to be good citizens and productive workers. That's our challenge.

Can you talk about competing internationally?

Other countries are not standing still. It's a big issue. The United Kingdom is building out its educational system, Korea and others are building out. So we must behave like it's a global market.

Student debt has exceeded credit card debt in this country. What is the university system doing to help students manage that debt?

SUNY's tuition is lowest in the Northeast and in the lowest quartile nationally. So while our tuition is, I think, affordable for many students, any tuition is a challenge.

We are trying to work very directly with our students to help them watch every dime they spend on college effectively. We don't want students to leave college with loans and debt they cannot repay.

We're piloting this SUNY Smart Track at six of our campuses, University at Albany, Schenectady County Community College, SUNY Fredonia, Niagara County Community College, Purchase College and SUNY Ulster. Next year we plan to go to scale at all our campuses to help all of our students manage the cost of college. That's absolutely the right thing to do.

Can you explain what you mean when you talk about "sealing leaks in the education pipeline?"

All that means is, every child every step of the way, cradle to career.

All that means is, from birth on, there are many, many children in this country who need more support than they get. As a consequence, we need to make sure they have a quality childhood and they get to kindergarten ready to learn. And that as they progress through our educational system, and are ready for college and career.

Most of the kids who don't have the support they need are the ones who are growing up in poverty. It's not a racial or ethnic issue. It is an issue of poverty. But, in fact, race and ethnicity are disproportionately represented by poverty.

What part will New York's public university system play in that process?

We have committed SUNY to work side by side with our colleagues in early childhood and K-12 to make sure we are moving kids along productively that have the skills to be successful citizens themselves and make a living for their families.

So, it's an educational issue that's also an economic issue.

That's a mammoth task to take on. Where do you start?

In Albany, we have formed a table of leaders in this community for an effort we call The Albany Promise. We've got business leaders, educators representing higher ed and K-12, social agency leaders, all working on where are we losing students and how can we keep them in the education pipeline.

I'm a big believer in this strategy.

It's something that I played a role in in Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky, and we have brought this idea into New York.

The whole point of it is, you can't seal the leaks in the education pipeline if you don't get everyone working together to move the dial. We know we have problems, but getting people organized to work together, that's the big challenge.

I think this is a perfect role for SUNY. We prepare the teachers who teach the kids who come to college ready or not. We own this issue.

Quick info

[Nancy Zimpher](#)

Title: Chancellor of the State University of New York

Age: 66

Hometown: Gallipolis, Ohio

Resume: President of the University of Cincinnati (2003-2009); chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (1998-2003); executive dean of the Professional Colleges and dean of the College of Education at The Ohio State University (1992-1998)

Education: Bachelor's in English and speech, master's in English literature, Ph.D. in teacher Education and higher education administration, all from The Ohio State University

Resides: Menands and New York City

Personal: Husband, [Ken Howey](#), a research professor at SUNY's Rockefeller Institute on

Government; one son, two step-sons; five grandchildren

Boards: [National Collegiate Athletic Association](#) Division I board of directors (2007-2009)

Inside SUNY

Campuses: 64

Annual budget: \$11.5 billion

Enrollment: 467,991

Employees: 88,024

Total graduate and undergraduate programs: 7,342



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