The Mindful Builder

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THE MINDFUL BUILDER

In a society that often appears to prefer outsized egos and undersized results, Elizabeth Davis embodies the opposite. She became Furman’s 12th president in July.

By John Roberts
Today, life is good on the Baylor University campus.

During a time when many private colleges and universities continue to struggle in a recovering American economy, Baylor is thriving. Applications, department budgets, and salaries are all on the upswing. The university recently launched a College of Health and Human Sciences, and a gleaming new $250 million football stadium has risen along the banks of the Brazos River.

There is an air of optimism, drive, and cheerfulness across the windswept 1,000-acre campus that is still basking in the glow of Robert Griffin III’s Heisman Trophy. Faculty and staff say morale has never been higher. Ask them about the Baptist-affiliated university’s mission, identity, and goals and—to a person—you receive the same answer: Life is good at Baylor.

The mood is a sea change from the internal bickering and controversies that gripped the university community and alumni just five years ago. There were fights over Baylor’s religious identity, faculty tenure, financial debt, and direction. Even the school’s logo was a point of contention. One president resigned and another was fired. Like a fast-moving storm rolling across the Texas plains, however, those dark days are a distant memory. And a lion’s share of the credit, say faculty, staff, and alumni, belongs to Elizabeth Boozier Davis.

Davis, who took over as Furman’s 12th president on July 1, graduated from Baylor in 1984 and joined the university’s faculty in 1992 after receiving a Ph.D. from Duke University. She assumed administrative duties as associate dean for undergraduate business programs in 2003 at a low point in Baylor history.

Stories about Patrick Dennehy, a basketball player who had been murdered by a former teammate, were making national headlines. The scandal led to the resignation of Baylor’s athletic director and head basketball coach.

On the academic front, an adopted strategic plan, Baylor 2012, had cut deep divisions in the university community with some alumni calling on then-president Robert Sloan to step down. During the next seven years, a cascade of controversies would follow. But through the calamity and musical chairs rotation of top leaders, Davis observed and took notes. Through the shortcomings—and successes—of others she came to understand the importance of listening, and honed a leadership style that is both self-deprecating and directive.

When newly appointed Baylor President Ken Starr promoted Davis to the university’s number two position (executive vice president and provost) in 2010, she was ready to help lead her alma mater in a direction that would unite the university and alumni behind a shared vision of what Baylor is and what it is striving to be.

“All of that stuff is like a bad dream now,” says Stephen Heyde, a longtime music professor at Baylor. “There was so much stress and fear on campus. Elizabeth has alleviated that with transparency. She is an extraordinary leader, a person who engenders trust.”
A natural teacher and problem-solver

The older of two children, Davis grew up in New Orleans where she attended an all-girls public high school. Her father was a practicing dentist and a professor at Louisiana State University’s School of Dentistry; her mother, a homemaker.

When it came time to choose a college, Davis gravitated toward Baylor, a Baptist-affiliated institution located in Waco, Texas, that she had learned about through family friends at church.

The campus Davis roamed was about 400 acres, roughly half the size of the university today. In the 1980s about half of the students identified themselves as Baptist, and 10 percent of the 10,000-member student body was represented by minorities. Tuition was approximately $1,500 per semester.

Delton Chesser, now a retired accounting professor, met Davis on the second day of class in the fall of 1983 and was drawn to her “warm and engaging smile.”

“As the semester progressed, I found out an incredible brain was behind that smile. Elizabeth and EJ Bird—another exceptionally bright student—made the highest grades on every test. Their remarkably high grades led to my coining the Boozer-Bird Phenomenon.”

Even before Davis, who played trombone in the Baylor marching band, was appointed acting chair of the accounting department (about 13 years later), Chesser recognized her extraordinary potential. Davis was focused, had a quick mind, and a knack for boiling down and explaining difficult concepts. She was well-liked, unassuming, and moved easily among all faculty circles.

“I urged her to consider going into administration,” he says. “I remember commenting ‘Someday you might

Early morning: President Davis checks in from her home office
even be a university president.' Her response was modest. 'Ah, I don't know. I better just stick to teaching accounting.'"

After graduating from Baylor (cum laude) and passing the CPA examination, Davis moved back to New Orleans where she joined Arthur Anderson & Co., then a Big Eight accounting firm, as an auditor. Davis found she delighted in becoming immersed in processes and complex financial issues. She took great joy in asking questions, figuring out how all the parts fit together, and developing a solution for the client. Even more satisfying, though, was the role she relished as teacher and manager.

"One of the things I realized was that many of the staff did not understand why they were doing the things they were doing. I had more fun teaching them how to put it all together than anything else," she says.

Davis decided to earn a PhD and return to teaching. During her graduate studies at Duke University, she met Charles Davis during a seminar on decision theory. A native of Farmville, North Carolina, Charles had graduated from the College of William and Mary, earned an MBA from the University of Richmond, and was working toward his PhD at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill when he met his future bride.

The couple dated for a year before they were married in 1989. The Davises have two children: Chad, 21, a student at Wake Forest; and Claire, 17, a student at Christ Church Episcopal School.

Charles joined the Baylor faculty in the fall of 1991; Elizabeth in January, 1992. Like many Baptist universities at the time, Baylor was smarting from struggles with the state's Baptist Convention. While church-university strains resulted in severed ties at Wake Forest (1986) and Furman (1992), Baylor found middle ground that allowed the Baptist General Convention of Texas to appoint 25 percent of the university's regents.

Many conservative evangelicals and alumni felt the move would lead the university down the path to secularization. But the opposite happened when in 1995 Robert Sloan, a Baptist minister, was named president and reaffirmed the school's religious roots. Moderates and some Baylor faculty were critical. Sloan stoked even more controversy in late 2001 when Baylor 2012 was unveiled.

The strategic plan aimed to transform Baylor, then a primarily undergraduate university with an enrollment of 12,000, into a top-notch research institution with highly ranked graduate programs. Faculty candidates with terminal degrees who published would be favored over others lacking prominent academic credentials. On Christianity, Baylor would buck the trend. The university would embrace its faith as distinctive and strive to become a world-class Christian university—a Notre Dame of sorts for Protestants.

Tuition, university spending, and debt rose after the plan was approved. So did the number of critics. Older faculty, who had focused on teaching instead of publishing, felt alienated by the research expectations for new faculty. Battles broke out over tenure. Alumni berated the administration for changing the character and mission of Baylor. Passionate and heated arguments grew on campus.

"There was a lot of bickering," says Heyde. "Lies were spread from both sides. There were negative stories in the paper. We lost a lot of things during the time, including any sense of unity."

The Baylor faculty senate approved two "no confidence" votes on Sloan and he resigned in 2005. The next president, John Lilley—who presided over the Dennehy scandal and failed to heal the rifts in the Baylor community—was forced out of office after three years.

"Baylor shaped me."

One of the few bright spots in the Pat Neff Administration Building was the provost's office, where Davis, serving as vice provost for financial and academic administration, led an effort to streamline the issuance of faculty contracts and effectively restructured resource allocation decisions for academic affairs.

"She was really able to get down into the weeds of an issue and solve the problem," says Tiffany Hogue, Davis's chief of staff at Baylor. "She is an extremely hard worker, always willing to take on significant new tasks. Hearing 'that's the way we have always done it' does not satisfy her."

Bill Bellinger, a 1972 Furman graduate and chair of Baylor's religion department, echoes Hogue's sentiment: "She is good at collecting different viewpoints, good about involving groups, and she is not so serious that she can't see the humor in life or in her job. She keeps her head about her while others are losing theirs."

In 2008, Davis was appointed interim provost. Two years later, Ken Starr, a former federal judge who rose to national prominence for leading the investigations that led to the impeachment of President Bill Clinton, was named Baylor's 14th president. The decision dismayed some alumni and faculty. Why was a person with such partisan baggage named to lead an institution that was deeply divided?

Just a few months into his tenure, Starr won over many faculty when he decided against launching a national search for a provost. He removed the word "interim" from Davis's title and elevated her to executive vice president. The promotion made her the top administrator for a 1,000-member faculty. She was also responsible for directing 11 schools and colleges.

"Elizabeth was a superb academic leader and had earned the trust of the faculty," says Starr. "I had heard that she was decisive, knew how to say 'no,' and was very thoughtful. She has been blessed with great analytical powers and is highly intelligent. It was wise and prudent

Facing page: Elizabeth Davis with her family in Jamaica, at White Oaks, the presidential residence, in her kitchen; and at the office.
to resist the practice of embarking on a national search.” Starr’s appointment lifted the campus community.

“When she was named, it was an incredible morale boost for everyone on campus because Elizabeth was so respected,” says Hogue. “Because she rose through the ranks of the faculty and had been here through the hard times, I think she had a good sense of what we needed to turn the ship around. For the university, I think, she was the center of a healing process.”

“There existed a comfort level when she was named executive vice president,” agrees Tom Hibbs, dean of Baylor’s Honors College. “People knew and trusted her.”

Davis and Starr were the elixir Baylor needed. Both were optimistic, disarming, and approachable. They, too, shared religious convictions that were in harmony with many in the Baylor community.

Starr won back disenchanted alumni and donors with his personal warmth, boundless energy, and engaging personality. While Starr was on the road, Davis built trust on campus with quiet competency and transparency.

As both settled into their roles, the campus mood lightened and the university began to realize the benefits of Baylor 2012. More top-flight faculty began calling the university home. Graduate programs flourished and student interest in Baylor grew. Undergraduate applications rose from 15,485 in 2005 to 23,249 last fall.

With the sun setting on the last strategic plan, Starr and Davis quickly set their sights on a new one. And

Davis, who witnessed the shortfalls of Baylor 2012, was determined to get the next one right.

“The process for developing it (Baylor 2012) was less inclusive,” says Davis. “There are times when you need bottom up and there are times when you need top down. If you are going to change a university, it is going to have to be from the top down. But you can have top down without creating rancor.”

Starr and Davis wanted to unite faculty, staff, and alumni with a shared vision. From Los Angeles to New York, Baylor officials made 16 trips to hear alumni out. A website was developed to collect input online. On campus, all academic and administrative departments submitted a document in response to a call for feedback. Everyone who wanted a voice was heard.
“John Barry (Baylor's senior vice president for marketing and communications) and I locked arms,” says Davis. “We knew that every step of the way we had to have very clear communication. And once we set a timeline we had to stick to it.”

In 2012, the university unveiled Pro Futuris: A Strategic Vision for Baylor University. The document, which will guide the university through the next decade, calls for Baylor to grow in five aspirational areas: transformational education, compelling scholarship, informed engagement, committed constituents, and judicious stewardship.

Pro Futuris did not have a single author. It was a collective project, thoroughly vetted and endorsed unilaterally. “After it was released, I don't remember getting a single nasty-gram,” says Barry. “That is really remarkable.”

While many had a hand in crafting Pro Futuris, staff and faculty say it was largely Davis’s project. It was her clarion achievement. Says Davis, “When people ask me what has been the most important achievement in my career, Pro Futuris is it. It shapes the future of the university, and it has a lot of clarity for people on campus.”

After 22 years at Baylor, Davis “gave herself permission” to explore leadership opportunities outside of Waco. “I've had people suggest to me that I should be a university president, then I began to imagine myself in the position and I knew that it was something I could do,” she says.

From the outskirts of the Texas hill country to the lush, rolling hills of the Upstate, Baylor and Furman are, to the casual observer, starkly different. Baylor enrolls 13,000 undergrads and 2,000 graduate students on a sprawling campus. Furman has 2,600 undergraduate students on 750 acres. But if you peel back a layer, similarities abound. And those attracted Davis.

“Baylor shaped me,” she says. “Faculty are at the top of their professions, but they are driven and motivated to bring their students into their discipline. It's a place where community matters, where the life of the campus matters, and where people care about each other. That's the kind of place that draws me. When I was asked to consider applying for the Furman presidency, I took a look and liked what I saw. I continue to like what I see.”

What kind of leader will Davis be? Those who know her best say Davis is intensely driven but disarming and funny. She asks a lot of questions and sets action items and deadlines after most meetings. She has a skill for saying no in a disarming way. Davis performs well in the limelight but does not seek it. She listens well, communicates clearly, and thinks broadly.

Davis, who puts her role as a mom and wife before all others, is known for sending handwritten notes and is unflagging in her faith, having served as deacon at her church in Waco and tweeting “May God continue to bless Baylor” on her last day there.

Moreover, they say, Davis gets the big picture. She thinks strategically and understands the challenges that higher-cost, higher-attention universities face during an environment when students and families are anxious about rising tuition and debt.

Throughout the summer, President Davis met with alumni, faculty, on-campus groups, and students. She has listened and, as part of that, fended off commenting specifically on changes she’ll push. From her time at Baylor, Davis knows clear communication, transparent leadership, and shared goals and identity can pave the way for future successes. Furman trustee Robert Hill ‘83, who chaired the university's president search committee and spent ample time with Davis and her family, says, “She will certainly look at opportunities and do some things differently.”

Former Interim President Carl Kohrt ‘65 expects Davis to be thoughtful about rising tuition costs and to look for different ways to tell the Furman story. “For someone who is data-driven, she has a good sense of what it takes to sell,” he says. “She has in her mind that we are underselling ourselves. She's going to be in a sale mode.”

Kohrt has come to realize what Davis's colleagues have long known: Behind Davis's calm demeanor and analytical mind is a restless desire to excel and innovate, to propel people and processes to reach their potential. And that she won't be afraid to shake up the status quo.

“The faster the world and our economy changes, skill sets become obsolete,” Davis says. “A liberal arts education can help you to reason through ambiguous situations and adapt to new circumstances. It keeps you from viewing the world in a narrow way. It's all the more relevant today.”

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**Pop Quiz**

We asked President Davis a few (more offbeat) questions to understand what moves and motivates her.

**Q: When you were a student, was there an unexpected course you loved?**
A: Geology—I found different rock formations and the reasons for those formations fascinating.

**Q: Favorite hobby you enjoy during your down time?**
A: The New York Times

**Q: Sunday crossword puzzle.**

**Q: As a parent and university president, what do you feel parents should want for their children in their college years?**
A: Among other things, I want our students to understand themselves and the world around them so that they might use their gifts and abilities to live a fulfilling life.

**Q: Is there a quality you would recommend students cultivate during their four years at Furman?**
A: Curiosity.

**Q: What sport do you most like to play?**
A: Racquetball

**Q: Where in Greenville have you already made a regular stop or part of your routine?**
A: We go downtown as much as we can, and we make sure all our visitors see Falls Park.

**Q: Song that’s most played on your iPod?**
A: Anything by Aretha Franklin.