

# DR. JACK'S SECRET SAUCE

Q&A with Dr. Jack Varsalona

JACK VARSALONA graduated from the University of Delaware with a degree in history and business all set to sell computers in North New Jersey. The Trenton native was lifeguarding in New Jersey when he got the phone call from the superintendent of the Appoquinimink School District who said, "We understand you can coach." A short time later he embarked on a teaching career that has led him on his lifelong pursuit of making education better in Delaware.

*Delaware Business* recently sat down with Wilmington University President, Jack Varsalona, for a schooling on higher ed.

## Can you give us some background on how you got your start in education?

I started in the classroom by accident. I was hired to coach. My second year I was teaching Special Ed, leading me to get my master's degree. A few years later I was Assistant Principal of Middletown High School and then Headmaster of Ursuline Academy. I was 26 years old. I loved that job, it was the best job I ever had.

Later the University of Delaware lured me away to become Director of Development. Three years later I joined the du Pont Administration as education advisor. After that I worked for the Department of Education for a year before I came here. I have been here for 29 years.

## Tell me about education initiatives under the du Pont Administration.

During the du Pont administration there were massive changes in education. We lowered the classroom size, added on to the deaf school, created the autistic school, the gifted and talented units, foreign language, and launched the Governor's School of Excellence.

A lot was accomplished because the General Assembly worked together. They reached across the aisle to get things done. It was the only way. It was an amazing experience for me. Lonnie George, Tom Sharp, Thurman Adams, Terry Spence, Bob Gilligan, Nancy Cook, and many others...we just worked together. Don't get me wrong, they had a lot to say about the Governor's education reforms, but they were involved in forming it. Everyone had to do a lot of give and take but we took the high ground. They would listen when we talked. It was all about doing the right thing.



*We do educate more  
Delawareans every year...by far.  
And we are proud of that!*

## What was it like doing that level of reform? Today you are in a fish bowl, parent groups, the internet...is it harder to get things done now?

Education is always full of interest groups. No matter what we did for someone, someone was upset. You had to bring them in and have a dialogue. You are right, we did not have all the social media, but people took stands and said, "I'll take the hit." It is always tough, but it is the funding of education that is the secret. You can change a lot with funding. We changed the funding if we wanted to make a change.

## You joined Wilmington College in April of 1987 as vice president of academic affairs, moved to provost, then became president in 2005 following Audrey Doberstein. You worked side by side with Dr. Doberstein to build Wilmington College. How was that transition following an iconic figure?

She is an amazing person and a leader. She made it great. We shared the same office for 4 years and I learned from her. Audrey saved the college.

## What made you transition from a college to a university?

I have chaired many accreditation groups. I was watching these teams thinking we are as good as this. We went through a process of getting national accreditation in every program we have. The transition from Wilmington College to Wilmington University was the catalyst for our growth.

## As a result, you have doubled your enrollment and expanded your campus significantly.

When I came in there were 9,000 students, now there are 21,000. The quality of what we offer improved through the process. We have not raised tuition more than 2½ percent in the last 10 years. We take no state or federal money.

Our endowment is up from about \$11 million to around \$77 million. We have not let ourselves depend on unsustainable revenue sources. In 2008, revenue sources for a college were federal and state money, gifts, interest off the endowment and tuition. We never used interest off the endowment or gifts for operating, they go right to student scholarships. We have just positioned ourselves where we have never had to raise tuition significantly. The University has no major debt, we are in a good place.

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## **How are you bridging the gap between your distance learners, your traditional learners and the reliance upon online learning?**

We started online learning about 8 years ago. In those days it was hard to figure out the quality of the product. We are now able to compare how the students performed online versus how they did in person based on outcome assessments. When quality is lax, we address it. We have found that in order to correct quality you need more contact with students. We have approximately 4,000 students online. Out of the rest of the students, 70 percent have taken one or more online classes. You can mix online classes – we know now the courses are of the same quality. Online is growing the fastest and we are at the leading edge of that.

## **What is next?**

Experiential learning is on the forefront. The philosophy behind that is we do not want to teach you what you already know. In the past, you had to create a portfolio and a committee of faculty would review it to see if that was equal to the course material. Now, we can measure it. For example, if you go to the state police academy, that is worth about 24 credits. There is no question academically about the soundness of that decision. We are in the process of breaking up courses into competencies. You can test out of classes where you meet the competencies. If you test out of the majority of the course, we are going to give you that course for free. We charge by the course, not by the semester. That is the future of education.

## **Don't you lose money by doing that?**

You do, but they tell their friends. We have a 75 percent adult student population here.

## **You are very hands on with your students...**

We conduct a lot of interest groups and we poll the students. The average class size is 16. We keep it at 16 to 18 because the graduation rates stay higher.

## **Do you have an attendance policy?**

We do. The adult population of our student body is different. They are paying for their education. They show up.

## **Where do you see the next hot industry coming from?**

STEM and the technology degrees are the future now, but you have to teach the students critical thinking. We have a 39 credit liberal arts core that is required. That is where you learn to think. Our college of technology has about tripled in 5 years, at all levels – masters, undergraduate.

## **Data shows that a large percentage of high school graduates coming out of Delaware public schools and going into a Delaware university are being placed in remedial classes in order to bring their basic competency level up to the college expectation. Are you seeing this?**

We have always had to tutor them, but we are open admission, not open graduation. We have a cohort of about 400 that come to us directly out of high school; 70 percent of our undergraduate students are transfers from DelTech or other community colleges. So I don't know if I am the authority.

Our athletes average GPA is 3.02 but some students struggle. The ones that come here and get involved in things, not just athletics, tend to suc-

ceed. I don't think I have seen a change in the level of the entering student, but we do spend a lot of money tutoring them.

K-12 often gets a bad rap. They have to educate everyone and that's not easy to do. My philosophy has always been fill their day up. Don't let them out of school unless they have a job. We measure many things here at Wilmington University. We trace back to see what these kids took in high school. Students that take a full load succeed. It used to be, you could get out of school early if you had a job and you would get credit for the work experience. Now, seniors leave the school at 11 a.m. and just go. That is my concern.

We have 400 high school seniors where we go into the school and teach them college English. They get to transfer that credit to us or wherever they want to go.

## **You have built your success on partnerships with the secondary education community in Delaware. Can you talk about what that is like when most colleges and universities tend to be insular and competitive for students?**

When DelTech designs a new program, first and second year, we follow up with the third and fourth year. We just know each other. Our Deans know their Deans. We figure if the student wants to go on, they should have a place to go.

With the University of Delaware, we are going after two different markets. We are close to UD; the provosts meet, it is the same with DSU. Their adult market is not as expansive so there is not a lot of competition there. Wesley, Goldey-Beacom and DCAD are also partners. It is The Delaware Way. We learn from each other. The market is big enough for all of us.

## **Superstars in Education is coming up in May and you are the recipient of the John H. Taylor, Jr. Education Leadership Award.**

He was an amazing person. You did not have to be around John for very long to understand his commitment to education. He always took the high ground in his positions – whether you agreed with him or not. His caring level was second to none. John and I would talk a lot about education and where we thought it should be going. He believed in opportunity. It's that concept of everyone should have an opportunity, that was him. Not only in education, but in everything he did. I'm just honored. John was a very special person.

John Taylor was our friend and colleague. It was important for all of us to have an award named after him, and just as important to have the right person be the first recipient. A lot of thought went into the selection. What does winning that award mean to you?

I can't believe it. Being recognized by the business community in his name is kind of like a double plus. I am speechless, it has not sunk in that the State Chamber would honor me. ■



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