



The *Franklin College Magazine* spring 2020 issue included the article “Leading Through Change, a Conversation with President Kerry Prather.” Due to space limitations, only a portion of the interview could be published. Here, we provide the full-length article and interview.

Men’s basketball players, past and present, know him as Coach. Friends in the community call him KP. And since his appointment in February, he’s known on campus as President Prather. It’s the latter role that Franklin College students, employees and alumni have come to count on for reassurance that better times are ahead.

When Kerry Prather accepted the Franklin College Board of Trustees’ appointment as acting president in January, Grizzlies were still reeling from the aftershock of the ousted 16th president’s arrest on sex-crime allegations. Prather, with his 37 years of executive leadership experience at the college, including advisory roles on four previous President’s Cabinets and management positions in admissions, student affairs and athletics, was primed for the role of acting president. Above all, he was eager to help restore leadership stability and promote healing within the college community he holds dear.

Prather promptly began meeting with faculty, staff and student groups to address fears and concerns, and he began routinely sending emails to the campus community and Franklin College family of alumni and friends. He pointed to the college’s historic strength in times of adversity, from devastating human loss during wartimes to debilitating disruptions caused by campus fires, and his uplifting messages about the institution’s resilience rekindled Grizzly pride that was becoming practically palpable.

Amidst the progress, the board of trustees suspended their external search for the college’s next president and by vote elected to promote Prather. On Feb. 22, he began a two-year appointment as college president.

Three weeks later, he had another crisis on his hands. COVID-19 was emerging in Indiana. Keeping the campus community safe and mitigating spread of the virus amid ever-changing guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Indiana Department of Health brought a new litany of concerns. Among other difficult announcements, he had to inform students, faculty and staff that on-campus classes were suspended and distance learning would continue through the remainder of the spring semester. He also announced cancellation of the Grizzlies’ spring athletic season, following the NCAA’s example, and postponement of commencement to Sunday, Oct. 11, coinciding with Homecoming and Alumni weekend. At a time

when Prather could understandably be wringing his hands, wondering what he has gotten into, he appears composed, confident and committed to helping Grizzlies march forward together. But, is he getting any sleep? We asked that question and many others during this interview conducted April 12 ...

Q: What do you see as your primary role as Franklin College President?

A: “Technically, it is to be the CEO, to provide direction and management for the entire enterprise based on the policies established by the board of trustees. At ground level, though, my role is to lead, to provide vision, direction and support for faculty and staff in the service of our students.”

Q: How do you stay focused and prioritize tasks in the current environment?

A: “The current situation is just tough for all of us. I keep reminding myself that everybody’s life has been turned upside down. So, I’ve got plenty to do to keep the work of the institution in motion, but I try not to lose sight of how hard this is for our employees and especially for our students.”

Q: What are some of the leadership principles most important to your management style?

A: “First and foremost, it’s the people. It’s always about the people. Give them direction, give them support, get out of their way and let them do their jobs. Carpenters say measure twice, cut once. My version of that is listen twice, talk once. I try to ask for plenty of ideas and perspectives before making decisions. Successful leaders share credit and shoulder responsibility. This job isn’t ever going to be about me. I think you can be confident and still be humble. People who make decisions make mistakes. I take responsibility for them, do my best to fix them, and try not to repeat them.”

Q: How does your career history as a coach inform your work as a college president?

A: “Coaching is leading, so that part is natural. Coaching is teaching, so I relate to the faculty because we’ve shared the same vocation. Coaching is results-oriented, and that’s a huge advantage. I learned long ago that you can’t stay too high with the wins nor too low with the losses. I’m pretty even-tempered in that respect.”

Q: What has been one of the hardest decisions you’ve had to make in your short time as president?

A: “Sending most everybody in the campus community home was really hard. It was definitely the right thing to do to keep everybody healthy, but I knew it would turn their lives upside down. Likewise, extending the distance learning meant the end of athletic careers and the loss of so many significant events for our students and faculty. That has really bothered me because I know how much all those things mean to the community.”

Q: Do you ever sleep?!

A: “I’ve always had a lot on my plate, and I enjoy that challenge. I’m an early riser, and I honestly don’t need lots of sleep. I work pretty efficiently and make good use of technology. I’m trying not to live on email, but I’m not having much luck.”

Q: What are three of the biggest challenges Franklin College faces currently?

A: “Like all colleges, especially small ones, enrollment is an ongoing challenge. The demographic trend isn’t in our favor, so we have to be really good at what we do and really good at marketing the distinctive opportunities here and their value for students. Finances on small college campuses are always tight, and ours is no different. I’d like to do more, have more, provide more, but our budget model doesn’t include a lot of breathing room. We have to be really efficient in

everything we do in order to do it well. We have some facility needs that are urgent. We have indoor athletic needs that we have to address because so many of our students are engaged in athletics. We have some technology needs as well that are critical to support the opportunities our students want and need.”

Q: Traditional four-year residential colleges like Franklin face tremendous skepticism from those who question their relevance and value in today’s global economy. What do you say to the skeptics?

A: “First, there is no better preparation for the changing dynamics of the economy than a quality liberal arts education. Narrow preparation in job-specific skills become obsolete quickly. The broader skill set of critical and analytical thinking, collaborative teamwork and strong interpersonal communication help students adapt to and thrive on change and innovation.”

Q: What changes do you wish to see at Franklin College during your presidency?

A: “First, I want everything we do to be student-focused. The primary question I have before every decision is, ‘How will this enhance the student experience?’ I’m also anxious for everyone in the campus community to assume and reflect a greater sense of pride in who we are and what we do here. This is a great school that is worthy of all of us proudly and loudly proclaiming its excellence. I also want our students to love their entire experience here — not just pieces of it, but all of it. I’d like more of them to be more broadly engaged in campus life.”

Q: How confident are you in the trajectory that the college is heading?

A: “I think the colleges with a bright future are the ones that know who they are and what they do well, who deliver on their value promise for students and families, and who operate at a high level of efficiency. I have great confidence in Franklin from each of those perspectives. We have to continue to market our distinctiveness aggressively. The truth is, the transformational experience for students at Franklin is real and life-changing, and we can prove that by the results, our successful alumni.”

Q: What are three takeaways you hope every student will gain from their Franklin College experience?

A: “I expect each student to receive help and encouragement in finding and clarifying their academic passion. I expect each student to find here the resources — human and otherwise — to support their pursuit of excellence in and out of the classroom. And I expect each student to have a successful, enjoyable and rewarding experience that inspires them to remain passionately attached to and supportive of Franklin College for life.”

Q: What roles would you like to see alumni playing at the college?

A: “Nothing reflects the quality of what we do here more broadly and impressively than the success of our graduates. I hope our alumni will proudly share their Franklin College experience with others, remain engaged with us in as many ways as possible and support their alma mater financially. I want us to be more intentional in connecting current students with alumni in as many opportunities as possible.”

Q: What has been a highlight in your short time of serving as president?

A: “I think I’ve been able to refocus the campus on the character and traditions that have made Franklin uniquely Franklin. There has always been a family atmosphere on the campus, and I’ve tried to bring that back in terms of how we appreciate each other, recognize efforts and achievements, and all feel like teammates working toward common goals.”

Q: Talk to me about the importance of family in terms of your spouse and children, as well as your extended family of Franklin College Grizzlies.

A: "Franklin College has been our home. Cindy and I were married in the chapel 35 years ago, and we decided we would pursue our goals as a family. Cindy has been the key to making that happen. She somehow held it all together for all of us while pursuing her own successful career on the faculty here (23 years with the department of education). Our lives have been very busy, and most of it was focused on Franklin College. Our children, Katie '13 and Robbie '17, grew up on campus, then both had great experiences as students and are now proud alumni. With this change in roles, Cindy and I are still working at everything together as we always have, and the kids are excited to help however they can. We all have many dear friends because of various connections to Franklin College. The campus continues to be home for us, but now we actually have a home on campus."

Q: Do you have a favorite place on campus ... a place that brings you peace or inspiration?

A: "I spent 37 years in Spurlock Center, so that will always be my favorite place, but I actually love the entire campus. Walking down Dame Mall is still special after all these years. I just need to figure out how to get out of the office more and enjoy all of the campus."