



BELOW: Richard Linton, the 15th president of Kansas State University, in his office in Anderson Hall.

PRESIDENTIAL Perspective

Kansas State University's newest leader provides insights about his life, goals and the university

story by **GRACE JACOBSON**

There is not a bigger role at Kansas State University than that of the president. The president is the face and voice of the organization, the person most looked to for guidance and direction.

Richard Linton has taken this role as the 15th president of our institution. He leads the university with the original land-grant university mission front and center. Before coming to K-State, he was the dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at North Carolina State University.

His wife, Sally, and two kids, Lily and Chris, are also relocating to Manhattan.

K-STATE

What drew you to K-State and this position?

“The people are amazing. If you want to be a president, you want to go to a place where the people are good. Fifteen years ago, one of my mentors and I began strategically developing the best pathway for me to gain the experiences needed to be an effective university president. I started as a faculty member, then a center director, later a department head and then served as a dean. All of these roles prepared me for where I am today. I wanted to go to a place that still believes in and has the land-grant mission as the foundation. So many other land-grant universities are heading away from

the missions of research, teaching and extension. Going to the first-operational land-grant institution after the Morrill Act was a pretty exciting opportunity.”

How have your experiences at four different land-grant universities shaped your vision for K-State?

“I was a student at Virginia Tech, and then I worked at three others: Purdue University for 16 years, The Ohio State for two and then NC State for 10. All of them have the same values and the integration of research, teaching and extension to benefit the state, nation and world. But they also have shown me that there are different ways to be successful. I’m trying to take the best practices that I have learned in building a better research community, creating a stronger and a better experience for the students, and engaging as much as we can through cooperative extension and beyond to try and implement some of those best practices here.”

Did you have any previous experiences with K-State?

“Yes, I had worked on a series of projects that started about 15 years ago and spanned for about a decade. I used to work with Dr. Dan Fung. He was an internationally known food microbiologist, and he used to do a two-week rapid methods course for detection

of foodborne pathogens. My team would teach about a day or a day and a half of that program. I was also involved in a big distance education food safety program and a simulation for the food industry with a number of faculty in the Food Science Institute.”

What would you say is the greatest outlier of K-State versus other institutions?

“It’s the people, and it’s not even close. The students, faculty and staff are just amazing. One of the great things about K-State is that students have a voice in our governance process here and are a part of the future strategy of the university, both on the undergraduate side and the graduate side. It’s the right thing to do, but I haven’t experienced that kind of integration before.”

How have you seen K-State exude the idea of family?

“Family means people who care for and support you no matter what. I have never been more welcomed in any place I’ve ever been, and I’ve never seen a stronger and more collaborative community working together.”

What was his best advice President Myers gave you when you started this job?

“Be yourself always, and you’ll be fine.”

STUDENT BODY

What should the student body know about you?

“Probably the most important thing is that I really care about students, and this university doesn’t exist without them. And I want them to know that I’m approachable and want to try to make this university better with their ideas. As I’ve gone to basketball games, I’ve invited students to attend with me. That has been great for a couple of reasons. First of all, students tell you the 100 percent truth about this university, and it helps me understand the really great things and some of the things that we need to work on. Second, I want other students seeing me with students, to understand I’m approachable. In higher education, there’s a lot of places with a lot of presidents who don’t put the value on the students where they should. The biggest thing that I miss with being an administrator is not being in the classroom. It’s so difficult not to be one-on-one with students every day. So, I’m trying to do everything I can to try to engage with them when I can’t be in the classroom.”

What are some common themes you have picked up on from the students?

“Many of the students I’ve met are not from Kansas. Once they came here, they were hooked, and it’s just been the greatest experience they’ve ever had. This place has just given them an experience that I wish I had when I was an undergrad.”

What are your thoughts on this generation of college students?

“Today’s students are very entrepreneurial. They want to have internships, they want to have leadership opportunities, they want to be involved in student government, and they don’t want to learn with a professor going through a PowerPoint presentation. They want to be hands-on with applied learning with relevant examples in their field. As a land-grant university, we don’t want to be reactive; we want to be adaptive and proactive. I have a sense here that we’re further ahead than most other places that I’ve been. This

university puts students first, which is the way it’s supposed to be.”

As a dad yourself, what is the best advice you’ve given your own kids?

“Live your dreams, and make sure that they’re your dreams, not anybody else’s. Go hard, go strong or don’t go at all.”

Would you say that is the same advice you have for K-State students?

“I would say live your dream but get involved. Get involved in as much as you possibly can. Get to know your professors, get to know the department head, do an internship, do undergraduate research, take a class because this is the only time in your life that you’re going to be able to do it. Explore whatever you want to do. Take advantage of it.”

What do you think K-State’s next target demographic for recruitment is?

“There are lots of potential new targets demographically. One of the targets



RIGHT: Richard Linton speaks with Grace Jacobson about his vision for the university.

has always been high school grade science classes. That seems to be an important attractor for land grants and connecting with students, their parents and guidance counselors. I think there are opportunities with the Hispanic demographic that is rapidly growing in the state as well.”

What is your pitch for prospective students to come to K-State?

“I think it’s the most amazing college experience I’ve ever seen. Seventy-five percent of the students who visit end up enrolling. I wish that we could take the university to them, to be able to show them that experience – to be able to attract more students to want to come to Kansas State. Because when you come here and experience it, you love it.”

GOING FORWARD

What is your five-year plan?

“I say my plan and my vision will be your plan and your vision. It’s important for everybody to understand that. My goal is to push forward the vision and the aspirations faculty, students and staff have. At the end of the day, I want to be the best land-grant university we possibly can be and have the best experience for our faculty, students, staff, alumni and external stakeholders. A few very simple

lessons I’ve learned and all the other roles that I’ve had led to this idea that if you listen to what people want to do, and you provide opportunities for them to do that, they will support you and great things will happen.”

How do you see the College of Agriculture helping to accomplish university-wide goals in the future?

“I don’t think any big aspirational goals can be accomplished without multiple strategic partnerships. Those partnerships can be with other colleges on campus, other universities in the region or across the nation, with external stakeholders, big agriculture tech companies, or even commodity groups and entrepreneurs. The goal is to be able to understand what those big aspirations are and move forward with the best collection of stakeholders and partners to make them happen. There are already great partnerships here, and that’s one of the reasons I’m here. The College of Agriculture is incredibly strong. My hope is to make it stronger, by developing and enriching the partnerships that we have and creating new partnerships that we don’t have. Economic vitality is an important strategic pillar of the state. The College of Agriculture is important in growing the economy and creating jobs in all 105 counties. My job is to challenge our faculty, students and staff to build

better and more robust partnerships to move us forward.”

You talked about economic viability being a key issue facing Kansans. How do you see the university playing into the solution?

“Kansas as a whole is losing population. How can we create new and stimulating opportunities to draw people to the state of Kansas? I think agriculture plays a key and critical role of creating those job opportunities and bringing industry into the state. It’s always an important issue for the agriculture industry, and we need to do everything we can to help create a talent pipeline that’s going to satisfy its needs. We need to be better attractors of students who have an interest in agriculture. It’s not just as people visualize plows, sows and cows. That’s a part of it — and it’s an important part of it — but there’s other pieces. I think nationally, we’re only producing 61% of the students needed to support the agricultural industry. That means the people hired into the other 39% of jobs don’t have a background in agriculture and may have never been on a farm. We have to change those dynamics and make it more interesting. That means working with students, parents and guidance counselors to talk about the value of a job in agriculture and food systems.” **KS**



RIGHT: Richard Linton meets with students during a food science club meeting.