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Challenging the U.S. education system

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The Epic Poetry Strategy

Following his return to Oklahoma, he was approached with a question he had not formally considered: running for office.

James Halligan, who received his bachelor's degree, master's degree and doctorate in chemical engineering at Iowa State University, did not spend much time in the engineering field. Instead, he spent most of his adult life working in higher education. Between his doctoral hooding ceremony and his retirement, Halligan worked at Iowa State University, Texas Tech University, Missouri University, Arkansas University, New Mexico State University and Oklahoma State University.

At OSU, Halligan was president from 1994 to 2003. He was expected to complete a 10-year term but instead retired one year early. When he stepped down, Halligan reasoned that the major goals he set for himself and the university had already been accomplished.

Oklahoma State University's enrollment had declined 12 years in a row before Halligan's arrival.

"The most important thing a leader can do is influence the culture," Halligan said. "The university had become much less focused on the students, and I intended to change that."

To angle the attention back toward students, Halligan had a lot to accomplish. According to Oklahoma state communications, he led a \$270 million campaign that brought to campus the Center for Student Services, multimedia classrooms and suite-style living in residence halls. He and his wife, Ann Halligan, welcomed 3,000 students into their home annually. He created the student leadership complex on the campus by encouraging student-led events including Orange Peel, homecoming and Into the Streets.

Due to the steps Halligan took, enrollment and retention increased each year, leading him closer to his goal of a 60-percent graduation rate. Before his retirement, the university was named a Truman Honor Institution and deemed American's Best College Buy.

Another of Halligan's primary focuses during his presidency at OSU was research and economic development. Three hundred and eighty million dollars were put into achieving this goal. Today, Oklahoma State University is well-known for its research advances.

Halligan wanted to ensure that his work to increase enrollment, retention, graduation rates and research would be maintained. He continued working as president another eight months until his replacement, Burns Hargis, was hired. Halligan was involved in the selection process.

Today, Halligan serves as a district 21 republican senator of the state of Oklahoma. He serves on five committees: the general conference committee of appropriations, the education committee, the energy committee, the finance committee and the rules committee. He has served as the primary sponsor of 57 bills, 27 of which are based on education.

Halligan was first elected to the state's senate in 2008, six years after his retirement from Oklahoma State University. During those six years, he never stopped working in education. While still in Stillwater, he worked as a professor in the College of Education. After that, he travelled alongside his wife to teach in Taiwan, Bulgaria and Germany.

When he returned from his time outside of the country, he was approached by the community about running for office. Though he had not previously considered the idea, he was intrigued and encouraged by the community's confidence in him.

"Flattery really does the trick," Halligan said.

While teaching abroad, Halligan realized a truth that has led his career ever since: this country isn't trying hard enough.

"We need to have higher standards for our own students," Halligan said. "What happened? We aren't trying as hard. What can we do to make certain that they can?"

According to an article published by the Huffington Post in 2012, the United States does not rank among the top 10 countries for education. At the top of the list is Finland and South Korea. Some of the factors involved in determining the ranking are international test scores, graduation rates and the prevalence of higher education seekers.

Improving education in this country has been Halligan's focus since his election. According to the Oklahoma Senate, 27 of the bills he has sponsored have been for the improvement of education. Though the majority of his lifetime was spent working for universities, Halligan has paid his dues in the senate working for changes in the Oklahoma high school program.

According to an interview conducted by Oklahoma Horizon, 77 students graduate out of a hundred who enter high school in the state of Oklahoma. Of that 77, 36 enroll in a college program. Of that 36, 23 remain enrolled to their second year. Halligan argues that these statistics are a reflection of the country as a whole, not just the state.

To tackle this issue, Halligan has written bills speaking about more funding for high schools, providing concurrent courses not only for college credit but also tech school credit, and requiring students have four years of math and science to receive a high school diploma. According to the U.S. Department of Education's website, it is the mission of the department to "promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access." Halligan is doing what he can to achieve this mission.

Earlier in his life, Halligan never lived in one place much longer than 10 years.

"I happen to believe life is too short to spend in one place; it is a fundamental conviction I have found in life," Halligan said.

While he received tenure more than six times, he never wore the "golden handcuffs."

His time as president of Oklahoma State University did not last ten years, but he has continued living in the college town of Stillwater. Jim Halligan and his wife, Ann Halligan, have become attached to the city. They have good relations with the university, attend many of its events and sponsor many of its campaigns. Of their eight grandchildren, several have received their bachelor degrees from OSU and one is attending the university.

"The leader has to show that they care," Halligan said. At OSU, Halligan never stopped caring, even after his early retirement. In the Oklahoma State Senate, Halligan leads by example by caring about education in the state and in the country.

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