



New Vice President for Research Wendy Baldwin works with associate vice presidents Joe Fink (left) and Del Collins.

From the Beltway to the Bluegrass

WRITTEN BY
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The University of Kentucky's new vice president for research feels like she's come home. "Yes, even though it's been 30 years since I left UK as a freshly minted Ph.D., I do feel like I am 'coming home,'" says Wendy Baldwin, who took over UK's more than \$200-million-a-year research enterprise the first of this year. After receiving a B.A. in sociology in 1967 from Stetson University in Deland, Florida, she worked in New York City as a social worker. But then a simple phone call changed her life.

"A good friend of mine working on a Ph.D. in sociology called me from Lexington. 'You ought to come here,' she said. 'They have a great sociology program.' So I decided to come to UK sight unseen. I squeezed all my possessions—and my two cats—into my Austin Healey 3000, and headed for the Bluegrass," says Baldwin, who had never been to Kentucky.

A Pennsylvania native, she earned two advanced sociology degrees from UK: a master's in 1970 and a Ph.D. in 1973.

Baldwin, whose affable and engaging nature strikes you immediately, brings to UK 30 years of experience at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, Maryland, one of the nation's largest federal funding agencies, where for the past nine years she served as deputy director for extramural research. She says extramural research is the largest part

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of NIH, accounting for over 80 percent of the \$27 billion annual budget. Each year the agency supplies funding to more than 50,000 investigators affiliated with 1,700 universities, small businesses, academic medical centers, and other research facilities worldwide through a process of competitive peer review.

Baldwin says there were two primary reasons she wanted to come to UK. “I think the university is poised to grow academically, and the administration is totally committed to strengthening UK. There is such energy here to build the research program, and it seemed like my background was a good fit with UK’s goals.”

Baldwin was also impressed with Kentucky’s commitment to higher education that resulted in the Research Challenge Trust Fund (RCTF), more commonly known as Bucks for Brains, which was established in 1997. (For more information on RCTF, go to www.rgs.uky.edu/ca/rctf.) “For some time now, I’ve been holding up Kentucky as an example of how the state/university working relationship can be mutually beneficial,” she says.

But Baldwin realizes she has arrived at UK at a challenging time. “Most states are facing hard choices in their budgets—Kentucky is not alone,” she says. “Despite this, we need to repeat our message over and over: when the state supports the mission of a research university—a crucial partnership—there are not only significant economic returns and intellectual returns, but also advances in the quality of life for our citizens.”

Building various types of partnerships has been Baldwin’s stock-in-trade at NIH. “I went there on a two-year appointment and, well, those two years

turned into 30.” She says she particularly enjoyed working on extramural funding with universities like UK. “NIH can’t fund research unless there are universities out there that can do the work. Most of my career has been spent working with the academic community to help them develop their research programs and also make successful applications to NIH.”

In her work at NIH, Baldwin has seen firsthand how extremely competitive research funding is, and she believes research universities can’t rest on their laurels when it comes to funding successes. She says one way research universities can stay competitive is to continually look at how they are supporting their researchers, especially new faculty. “It’s hard to get started in research, and it’s important that young talent be nurtured. That has implications for how postdocs are treated, how an office like mine is able to demystify the process of seeking external funding, and how seed money is made available,” says Baldwin.

Another challenge, she says, is the need to link up researchers who have common interests. “Universities and the federal funders are all struggling with how to identify those areas that truly need an interdisciplinary approach and then how to ensure that people can work together effectively. That goes to the heart of how an institution is organized: Does the system reward faculty who work together across

department or college lines?”

Baldwin, whose enthusiasm and energy are contagious, is looking forward to these challenges at UK while focusing on her primary goal of helping to build research programs. “One of the things I’m proudest of at NIH was helping to create a bioengineering consortium. The problem had been that bioengineering was spread all across the 24 NIH institutes and centers. We were able to bring all of that together and launch a new program that has put about \$150 million into this area for the NIH,” Baldwin explains.

Breakthroughs in bioengineering research, she says, can directly affect our health and well-being. In the biomedical arena, for example, the genome project has taken giant steps in mapping the genome; now the challenge is to understand how those genes function and the role of proteins. These advances will eventually help us better understand diseases and enable us to successfully target therapies.

Baldwin has also worked on a broad array of policy issues such as human subjects protections, reduction of regulatory burdens and conflicts of interest. “These are all issues that are critical for universities to address and that call for a strong partnership with the federal government,” she says.

“Right now, I’m doing a lot of listening,” Baldwin says. “I’m interested in what our faculty think about current research programs and about launching new programs. I also want to work with faculty and staff to further strengthen our outreach efforts. As Kentucky’s flagship university, we have a bottom-line responsibility to do what we can to improve the lives of Kentuckians.” ■