

## **EKU ensuring brighter future for all Kentuckians**

By By MICHAEL BENSON and GLENN DENTON

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When Eastern Kentucky State Normal School was established in 1906 as one of two normal schools for the preparation of schoolteachers, Kentucky lagged behind almost all its sister states in public school education. Only in the few urban centers of the Commonwealth could children hope for a decent education that extended beyond the eighth grade.

Though they wrangled over the sites, legislators ultimately agreed that the time was right to take bold action to ensure a brighter future for all Kentuckians. Additional normal schools in Murray and Morehead soon followed the ones in Richmond and Bowling Green.

Times have certainly changed over the past 110 years, and the missions of Eastern and its sister institutions have evolved. Each is now a fine regional comprehensive university.

The question we must ask ourselves today is if the need has changed. Yes, emphatically so. Never in the history of our Commonwealth has the need been greater for accessible, affordable public higher education. And that is why a recent editorial titled "Pain" in this newspaper is so troubling.

The editorial was correct in its geography -- Richmond is indeed 27 miles south of Lexington. And geography is the one thing we cannot change. But it must be noted that the missions of the University of Kentucky, a land-grant research institution, and EKV are vastly different, with Eastern drawing heavily from the densely populated I-75 and I-64 corridors.

The editorial was also correct in its blunt assessment of the Commonwealth's unfunded pension liability, a stark reality that has altered the public higher education landscape and threatens our progress on so many other fronts. It was dead wrong, however, in its implication Kentucky might somehow have too many public universities.

For 110 years, Eastern has rightfully prided itself as a School of Opportunity, a place that has inspired generations of students, many from disadvantaged backgrounds in some of the poorest counties in the nation, to dream big dreams. Approximately 76 percent of EKV graduates are employed here in Kentucky one year after graduation, the state's highest percentage among all its public four-year institutions.

Most importantly, many of those graduates are serving in professions vital to the quality of life throughout the Commonwealth: public safety, education and health care. Many of the latter are employed in some of our most medically underserved counties. Whatever the need, EKV graduates are workforce-ready.

If it is somehow duplicitous to have two radically different institutions of higher education in such close proximity, how do you explain that EKV's enrollment has risen steadily in recent years to reach near-record levels of approximately 17,000?

If Eastern is not a high-quality academic institution deserving of public support, how do you explain that more and more of Kentucky's best and brightest students are showing up at its doors? This year's

freshman class is the best prepared academically in EKU's history -- with 91 percent hailing from Kentucky.

If the "Eastern Experience" is not deemed a worthy investment of our students' time and money, how do you explain the fact that the university just completed its best year ever for private support?

All this explains why Eastern is moving confidently forward with the most ambitious campus revitalization initiative in its history. Most of the projects now underway are financed by creative public-private partnerships that burden neither students nor taxpayers.

So, let us talk about pain, but let us also bear in mind that this is about far more than just the value and contributions of Eastern Kentucky University, or any one of our fine institutions of higher learning. Jarring as it is, the pain Kentucky is experiencing today pales in comparison to what future generations will feel if we foolishly pit our public universities against one another. Let us instead follow the example of those far-sighted leaders a century ago, make wise investments and work together on building a stronger economy and brighter tomorrow for all the citizens of our Commonwealth.

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