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Husted: DU Chancellor Rebecca Chopp and the reward of a quality education (Slideshow)

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Rebecca Chopp is the first female chancellor in the 152-year history of the University of Denver. And she was the first female to hold her four previous collegiate appointments – provost and vice president of academic affairs at Emory, dean at Yale, president of Colgate, president of Swarthmore.



KEVIN J. BEATY

Chopp, 63, came to DU in the fall of 2014.

Born and raised in Kansas, the daughter of a laborer/farmer dad and a stay-at-home mom. She went at Kansas Wesleyan for undergrad, then on to earn a masters at St. Paul School of Theology and a Ph.D at the University of Chicago.

When she came to DU, she already thought of Denver as a second home town. As a child, her family vacationed in Denver, always staying at, of all places, the Bugs Bunny Motel on West Colfax (now the Big Bunny). She and her husband bought a condo off Larimer Square six years ago because Denver always meant “vacation” to Chopp. Now it means work, sometimes leaving her downtown digs at 5:30 a.m. to put in a day at the chancellor’s office. That’s where we meet. She has a sit down desk next to a stand-up desk with a computer on it. The room is lined with books, all hers except for a panel of classic children’s tomes. The three clocks in the room all tell the wrong time. I point it out. “I know,” she says, shaking her head.

Bill Husted: Are you a staunch defender of the liberal arts education?

Rebecca Chopp: A big defender, but it's just the facts. College educated people earn on the average \$1.5 million to \$2 million more in their lifetimes. They have lower unemployment rates. It pays off for people financially. And it pays off for people in terms of their commitment to their community and their ability to be leaders.

BH: DU costs about \$60,000-a-year, putting it right up there with the country's most expensive colleges. Is that troublesome to you?

RC: Very few pay that, right? Eighty-six percent of our students are receiving financial aid.

BH: What about sexual violence and harassment here?

RC: We're seeing a movement across the United States to try to prevent sexual assault – to have much more education about it. And then when it occurs we have a culture here of support, a culture of reporting and a culture of care. The students here have gotten so involved, in training one another to intervene, to get involved in bystander training.

BH: Football ended at DU in 1961. Do you miss that here?

RC: First of all, with the Broncos in town, who needs a football team? We're phenomenally happy with our lacrosse, hockey, gymnastics. Football is a very expensive sport – lots of injuries. We do well in the sports we have.

BH: I have read that you believe in the "yes" culture, that you always try to say "yes."

RC: I try to empower students, I try to listen, let them know that I heard them.

BH: Are you pretty approachable around campus?

RC: Yes, yes. I walk around and the students here are great. They look me in the eye and they know my name, well, the name "Chancellor."

BH: How are the students here different from the students at Swarthmore?

RC: I think the students here are very focused on going to law school, into social work, becoming teachers. They are focused on the end game. They step up and are responsible for the community. They are very independent. The Swarthmore students were really intellectuals, many of them went on to get Ph.Ds and teach. It was a really different type of student, a more classic academic student.

BH: When you were offered this job, did it feel right?

RC: It was a hard decision. Swarthmore is a great school and I had been there only five years. But I had family in place (a sister in Denver and a son in Ft. Collins). And DU is one of those schools that is happening right now. Denver and the Front Range, it's an incredibly exciting place to be. There is a feeling that something is going on here that is very different.

BH: Are you challenged by the (low) endowment here?

RC: We have to build the endowment.

BH: What do you fear?

RC: We have 18-to-21-year-olds here, whether it's at DU or Metro or Colorado College. My fear is that those students can make very bad choices. I live with that fear every day because I feel very responsible for those students.

BH: What do you think of Bernie Sanders' proposal to make all state colleges tuition free?

RC: I think that people in this society who cannot pay for education, we can respond to them. I also think that people who can pay should pay. Maybe it's only \$500 or \$5,000. It's an investment in their future. If people can pay they ought to be willing to put some skin in the game.

BH: What's your greatest extravagance?

RC: I really don't know. My husband and I don't have the time to go out for fine dinners. I am extravagant when I take a day off and go hiking in the mountains.

BH: What's your current state of mind?

RC: I am happy, I am engaged.

BH: Are you going to stay at DU until you hang it up?

RC: Absolutely. For an educator, you couldn't be in a better place.

BH: What don't you like about your appearance?

RC: I am too short. (At 5'4")

BH: Is there a word you overuse?

RC: In emails I overuse "amazing," "perfect," "terrific."

BH: What's the greatest love of your life?

RC: My husband of course. I love the mountains. And the visual arts. I have a long love affair with museums and visual art.

BH: When and where were you happiest?

RC: I'm a happy person. I loved getting my Ph.D. I went to a little college in Kansas with 600 students. It was tiny. And I went to the University of Chicago to get my Ph.D. I thought that was the most spectacular thing in the world. People were thinking and doing and talking about things I didn't even know existed.

BH: What would you change about yourself?

RC: I would sleep more. I sleep four or five hours-a-night.

BH: What's your greatest achievement?

RC: I have been really blessed with a lot of opportunities. I cannot believe that two universities and a college hired me to be their CEO. And I've never been fired from any of these jobs, so that's an achievement.

BH: What's your favorite thing to do?

RC: Hiking. Museums. And I am a great reader.

BH : Favorite book of all time?

RC: "The Confessions of St. Augustine."

BH: Hero in fiction?

RC: As I child, Trixie Belden. She was a girl detective. I thought that was pretty cool.

BH: What were you like as a little girl?

RC: I had a very serious speech impediment. I couldn't pronounce words. I went to speech therapy until I was 12. That made me a great reader and very timid and shy.

BH: What have you learned at 63?

RC: People are usually right in what they affirm and wrong in what they deny.

BH: Movies?

RC: I go to the movies every other week or so. My son comes down and we go to the movies. We just saw "Batman vs. Superman." It was great.

BH: What are you most grateful for?

RC: I have lived an amazing life.

BH: What would you like on your tombstone?

RC: "She served and she loved."

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