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Taylor University leans into Christian identity to attract big gifts

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i Taylor University publicly launched its \$500 million Life to the Full campaign in April. (Photo courtesy of Taylor University)

Taylor University is a small school in a small town. About 70 miles northeast of Indianapolis, it's surrounded by gently rolling fields and woods. It's in tiny Upland, home of Ivanhoe's, renowned for shakes and sundaes.





Taylor, though, is thinking big. It is among Indiana universities enjoying significant gains in enrollment and donations. Taylor racked up the highest number of individual million-dollar-plus gifts, 14—including one \$40 million and two \$10 million donations—among the 57 donations in IBJ's 2024 list of largest individual gifts to Indiana organizations.

Taylor has raised \$308 million of its multiyear \$500 million Life to the Full campaign, which the school calls one of the

largest fundraising initiatives ever for a Christian college.

The school is direct in its pitch: “Taylor is very committed to its Christian identity,” Taylor President Michael Lindsay said.

With various approaches by different schools, higher education remains a philanthropic juggernaut. More than three-quarters of IBJ’s list of Largest Individual Gifts in 2024 were made to universities for uses including undergraduate scholarships, building construction or remodeling, and medical research. All told, 57 individual donors gave more than \$650.1 million in big donations to Indiana nonprofits last year.

Two gifts were for \$150 million each. The Merrillville-based Dean and Barbara White Family Foundation funneled a gift through the Chicago-based Big Shoulders Fund to the Diocese of Gary for Catholic schools with the greatest economic and educational need in northwest Indiana. The other \$150 million gift was an anonymous donation to  [DePauw University](#) in Greencastle, a donation accompanied by \$50 million in additional contributions. The  [University of Notre Dame](#),  [Marian University](#) and  [Indiana University](#) also attracted individual gifts of \$20 million or more.

Amir Pasic, dean of the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, said so-called mega gifts are becoming more common.

“It wasn’t long ago where a \$100 million gift

would have been quite remarkable, but we're seeing more of those," Pasic said. "That's a bit of the overall story of philanthropy in America ... that we're seeing more giving coming from a smaller number of donors."

He added that universities are particularly attractive to donors because of "the role of education in being able to transform society."



Amir Pasic

Clarity in messaging

Taylor appeals to certain donors. A visitor to Taylor sees many reminders of the school's religious affiliation. In the Freimuth Administration Building outside Vice President of Advancement Mike Falder's office, a Bible recently sat open to the Gospel of Luke. Signs on the wall read, "It is well with my soul," and, "Where God guides He provides."

In publicly launching the \$500 million Life to the Full campaign last April, after increasing the goal from \$175 million during the quiet phase of the campaign, Taylor President Lindsay remarked that most universities have abandoned faith commitments and that many in academia no longer recognize that there is absolute truth. "Five years ago, we were raising, on average, about \$13 million a year, and this past year, we did 10 times that amount," he said.



Michael Lindsay

According to Lindsay, Taylor's emphasis on faith has been

constant but was clearly articulated in 2020 when the university released five foundational documents to guide the university. Faculty and staff also must affirm the principles, which include a statement of faith and statements on the sanctity of life from “inception to its completion” and human sexuality, including marriage between one man and one woman.

Lindsay said Taylor strives to embody grace and truth and that the genius of American higher education is that it is heterogeneous, with students able to select from a wide array of schools.

“I don’t believe that Taylor has really any interest in being a culture-warrior kind of institution,” Lindsay said. “But the difference is, if you look at what happened on some of the campuses of the nation’s leading universities last year, when you have administrators who are unwilling to call genocide genocide, when you’re unwilling to just name terrorism as terrorism, that becomes a really difficult value proposition for most Americans. They’re looking for people to have a degree of moral clarity.”

Lindsay was referring to controversies that included contentious 2023 congressional testimony by three prominent university presidents about antisemitism on campus following the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks on Israel. Amid an intense backlash, critics said the presidents failed to clearly condemn antisemitism and threats to Jewish students. Two of the presidents, Liz Magill of the University

of Pennsylvania and Claudine Gay of Harvard University, resigned in the weeks following their testimony.

Biggest givers in Indiana

1. Dean and Barbara White Family Foundation, Merrillville

Gift: \$150 million

To: Diocese of Gary via Big Shoulders Fund

For: The money will be invested over 10 years in initiatives to improve the quality, accessibility and sustainability of Catholic schools in the Diocese of Gary, focusing on students and communities with the greatest need in northwest Indiana.

Background: Dean White, who died in 2016 at age 93, was one of Indiana's most successful business leaders, through his company Whiteco Industries. His wife, Barbara, died in 2018 at age 92.

Notable: The foundation said in June that the gift is believed to be the single largest donation ever to U.S. pre-K-12 Catholic education.



(Photo courtesy of Purdue University)



Steady growth

Beyond such serious issues, Taylor also emphasized its campus life and long-standing traditions such as “Silent Night,” where students wearing costumes pack the gym at Christmas time for a basketball game. They remain silent until the Taylor Trojans score their 10th point; they then celebrate and flood the floor (with no technical foul). Students then sing “Silent Night” to end the game. Taylor’s chapel services held at 10 a.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays often fill the roughly 1,500-seat Rediger Auditorium.

Taylor has 2,056 undergraduate students on its 952-acre campus and about 3,100 total students with online, dual enrollment and graduate programs. In August, Taylor welcomed 624 new undergraduates—574 freshmen and 50 transfers—marking a third consecutive year of growth. The school said 32% of the incoming class represented legacy students with at least one parent or sibling having attended Taylor.

“We are growing without compromising our academic standards,” said Holly Whitby, Taylor’s vice president for enrollment and marketing. She said the freshman class had an

average 3.9 GPA.

Using funds from its campaign, Taylor is adding programs in high-demand health care fields. Last fall, the school's new nursing program received initial accreditation from the Indiana State Board of Nursing. Whitby said applications for the nursing major are up more than 20% from last year's pre-nursing studies. "Now you'll see our billboards on I-69," she added.



Holly Whitby

Taylor is also launching and seeking accreditation for a physician assistant studies master's-level program. "Before you have any students, you've got all the faculty and staff," said Falder, Taylor vice president for advancement. "We've got about \$5 million on nursing and \$3 million on the physician assistant program to fund. So that's an active process."



Taylor University's chapel, its Horne Academic Center and nursing program are among the buildings and programs that will benefit from recent gifts. The school emphasizes campus life activities, including a "Silent Night" event, at which students wearing costumes pack the gym at Christmas time for a basketball game. (Photos courtesy of Taylor University)



'Something distinctive'

Taylor senior Elayna Kitt of Bluffton said in high school she was interested in attending the University of Notre Dame but was drawn to Taylor after her older brother went there to play

football.

“When I came and did my visit, I realized I was going to be set up so well for my future and career choices,” said Kitt, a biology major and member of the cross country and track teams. “I found my lifelong friends here and people I want to be around and want to be like.”

Kitt was interested in premed but switched her interest to dentistry after studying abroad in Ecuador as a sophomore and spending time shadowing a dentist in a day hospital. She plans to attend the Indiana University School of Dentistry.

Universities compete fiercely for students and money, especially since the pandemic. Undergraduate enrollment nationwide at degree-granting postsecondary institutions was 15.4 million in fall 2021, 3% lower than the year before, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

College also is expensive, especially at private schools like Taylor. For 2024-2025, the average “sticker” price for tuition and fees for full-time undergraduate students at a private nonprofit four-year institution was \$43,350, according to CollegeBoard’s Trends in College Pricing report.

Especially for small private schools, the stakes are high in attracting money and students. Iowa Wesleyan University and Wells College in New York state are among small institutions that have closed in recent years.

“We’re seeing those smaller schools that have less than

1,000 students and don't have much of an endowment, they're under a lot of pressure to attract students," said Pasic of the IU Lilly Family School of Philanthropy. "The ones that are succeeding are providing something distinctive in terms of the community that they create on campus."

He called Taylor's fundraising impressive and said the school was clear with prospective students and donors about what they could expect on campus.

Chuck and Lisa Surack of Fort Wayne have made large donations to Taylor, including \$5 million for the Horne Academic Center, which houses the Film and Media Arts program and the Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship. Last June, Chuck Surack announced he pledged an undisclosed amount that the school said surpassed the previous gift. He is also co-chair of Taylor's Life to the Full fundraising campaign.



Chuck Surack

An entrepreneur himself, Surack founded [Sweetwater Sound](#) in 1979. He said he has been impressed with the many Taylor grads he has hired and met over the years.

"The young people that come out of there just have that something extra special," Surack said. "They have their credentials they need for whatever their degree is, but they just have servant leadership."•

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