Southwestern’s new president wants to focus students on ideas, creativity

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BY RALPH K.M. HAURWITZ - AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

GEORGETOWN – At first blush, Edward B. Burger seems an unlikely choice for president of Southwestern University, a private liberal arts college in Georgetown.

He’s never been a dean. He’s never been a provost. In three decades teaching college students, he’s never aspired to those traditional jumping-off positions.
Southwestern’s governing board nevertheless concluded that he is the right fit for this place and these times. Financial pressures and rapidly changing technology, including increasingly ubiquitous online course offerings, are prompting Southwestern and other small colleges to consider how they might enhance the value of the four-year, residential experience that is their stock in trade.

Burger, something of a professor’s professor, has thought deeply about that, about creativity in connecting with students and about the future of learning. His bona fides as a teacher are about as good as they get: Ph.D. in math from the University of Texas; 23 years as a professor at Williams College in Massachusetts, one of the most prestigious small colleges in the nation; and a list of awards that includes a national biggie, the $200,000 Cherry Award for Great Teaching, from Baylor University.

What’s more, he has authored or co-authored more than 35 research articles as well as a dozen books, including “The 5 Elements of Effective Thinking.” And he’s something of a rock star when it comes to instructional math videos, having created more than 3,000 covering the curriculum from kindergarten through college.

“What does it mean to challenge students? Does it mean to give harder exams? Or does it mean to ask them to probe and actually pick a reading, do the reading and then lead a conversation?” Burger said during an interview at his suite in the Cullen Building, whose soaring Romanesque-style tower, completed in 1900, is the
signature piece of the 700-acre campus. “The students of today need to be challenged in ways that will allow them to be more productive and more innovative in the future.”

In short, he wants students to graduate from Southwestern as producers of ideas, not just consumers of them.

Burger, 49, succeeds Jake B. Schrum, who stepped down last month after leading Southwestern since 2000 and will become president of Emory & Henry College in Virginia on Aug. 1. Both schools are affiliated with the United Methodist Church.

Michael Starbird, a math professor at UT who has co-authored several books with Burger, said Southwestern will find him to be a high-energy, get-it-done kind of person.

“He's a great leader, meaning that he inspires other people,” Starbird said. “And he's sort of a salesman. He likes people, so he'll be good at making connections for fundraising purposes. He’s also extremely well-organized.”

Burger will need all of those skills, plus patience because change usually comes slowly in academia.

He'd like to revamp the governance structure at Southwestern in a way that would give faculty members a bit more clout. That would go against the grain of recent trends in higher education but could help secure faculty buy-in for his plan to put less emphasis on the knowledge-based aspect of the curriculum and more on the idea-based elements. Along those lines, he wants to expand the university's Paideia program, which gives small groups of students exposure to research, civic engagement and other activities.

Also on the to-do list: coming up with artful ways to cut costs but not quality, as well as beefing up the university's $263 million endowment. A just-completed capital campaign brought in $150 million in donations, so he won’t need to launch a massive fund drive anytime soon.

Burger, a native of New York state, is no stranger to Central Texas. The traffic’s a lot worse than it was when he was tooling around in his 1973 AMC Hornet during his graduate school days, but the grocery store cashiers are still friendly, he said.

“I really feel like this is more of a homecoming,” Burger said. “It’s not culture shock.”

Edward B. Burger

Born: Dec. 9, 1963

Education: Bachelor's in math, Connecticut College; doctorate in math, University of Texas

Currently: President, Southwestern University
Previously: Math professor, Williams College in Williamstown, Mass.

Worth noting: Likes to visit art museums, ride his mountain bike and watch “Arrested Development”