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# More than 40 years and \$3 billion later, Dale Seuferling looks back at KU Endowment career as he enters retirement



photo by: Submitted

It would still be several weeks before a game of southern California musical chairs would set the college football world on edge. In other words, USC and UCLA had not yet surprised the sports world by bolting to the Big Ten Conference and leaving their longtime Pac-12 home in disarray.



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Nonetheless, as Dale Seufferling sat in his office at KU Endowment and answered questions about his pending retirement as president of the organization, he was quick to respond to one question: What must KU guard against?

“Any downsides that might come with athletic conference shifts,” Seufferling said. “That is very real.”

Seufferling, of course, didn’t have any inside knowledge about what USC and UCLA would do, which has created new tensions around which conferences will survive in college athletics.

But he sure had a sense, which shouldn’t be surprising. Seufferling long has been KU’s master at reading a room.

Since becoming KU Endowment’s president in 2002, Seufferling has overseen the raising of more than \$3 billion worth of funds for the University of Kansas. The number would be much larger if it included every deal he had a hand in. While Seufferling has been president of KU Endowment for the past 20 years, he’s been a member of its staff since 1981.

In other words, he’s been in a lot of rooms.

And more than most of us, he's been in rooms where his purpose is to ask people for millions of dollars. What's the key to asking someone for a few million dollars?

Well, certainly you had better know them a bit, Seuferling said. Not just know them, but be able to understand and interpret what they are saying, especially about the goals they have. It will be helpful if you can articulate those goals back to them.

But at some point in time, you have to get around to asking. It is something he has reminded colleagues who are just getting into the fundraising business.

"It is not just an ongoing friendship," Seuferling said of the many dear relationships a KU fundraiser makes. "We need to accomplish something and have a result."

Picking the right time to make that big ask, as you might imagine, is important.

"Nothing can be more detrimental to the relationship than being overly aggressive," Seuferling said.

But with practice, you will figure out the right time. But even once the ask happens, there is still something else to learn: the under-appreciated art of the pregnant pause.

"You tell your story and then you say, 'John, to make that happen, we need ...'" Seuferling said. "Then you have that pregnant pause and wait for the answer."

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photo by: Chad Lawhorn/Journal-World

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Dale Seufferling mingles with a crowd at his retirement reception in June 2022 at the University of Kansas' Lied Center.

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In a performance hall at the Lied Center in June, there were many KU supporters in attendance who had shared a pregnant pause — or perhaps more than one — with Seufferling.

“He’s caused me to step up to the plate and give more money than I’ve ever given before,” Dave Dillon, chair of KU Endowment, retired CEO of The Kroger Co., and part of the namesake family of the Dillons grocery store chain, told the retirement reception crowd. “But more importantly, he’s caused you to do the same.”

Dillon had the numbers to prove it. He said when Seufferling started with KU Endowment more than 40 years ago, the association would take in a little more than \$10 million in a year from donors. The endowment association this year expects to collect about \$300 million from donors, he said.

But Dillon said Seufferling’s true value went well beyond those numbers, which was why Dillon said Seufferling’s retirement was a bit emotional for him.

“I think that is because I knew he always had a steady hand on Endowment,” Dillon said. “He’s always made me feel, we’ve got this, we can handle it.”

A steady hand on the wheel is appreciated when the cargo is \$2.8 billion in investments and assets, which is how much KU Endowment listed in its latest annual report.

But now the baton has been passed to a new hand. Dan Martin, the former president of Seattle Pacific University, was announced last month as the next president of KU Endowment. He starts the job this week, and Seuferling will stay on with Endowment through the end of the month to help with the transition.

On his way out, the plaudits have piled up. KU Chancellor Douglas Girod called him one of the top leaders the university has ever had, citing not just the dollars and cents he’s been involved with, but the goodwill he has built for the university.

“He builds phenomenal relationships,” Girod said.

Heath Peterson, president of the KU Alumni Association, said Seuferling had been a “true pillar for KU,” while also joking that Seuferling had the task of “breaking in” three chancellors during his tenure as president of the Endowment Association.

It was only half said in jest. Girod on several occasions has highlighted the institutional memory that Seuferling has provided. While Seuferling certainly isn’t the only person on Mt. Oread who has logged more than 40 years of service to the university, the club isn’t that big currently, especially among KU’s top leadership.

There’s another way to talk about that longevity, Robert Simari, executive vice chancellor for the KU Medical Center, told the retirement reception crowd gathered at the Lied Center.

“He knows all our deepest secrets,” Simari said.

But that has been a sense of comfort, not worry, Simari said.

“Dale is a source of great wisdom,” Simari said. “Whenever you kind of get off course or put upon by the day’s events or what is happening this minute, Dale

will come in with words of wisdom that put us on a pathway that keeps us directed on the straight and narrow going forward.”



photo by: Courtesy: KU Endowment

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Dale Seufferling is shown in an undated file photo from earlier in his career at KU Endowment.

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The path hasn't always been a straight one, though, Seufferling will tell you. There have been a lot of changes in the four decades on the job.

One of Seufferling's sayings is that when he first started with Endowment, the funds given to KU were more like the frosting on the cake for the university. State funding provided most of the money for the university to operate. Today, Endowment is responsible for baking a few cakes, as state funding has become a smaller portion of KU's overall revenues.

While the private dollars are relied upon more heavily, they also are given with more strings attached. In his early days, donors were most likely to give to a general university fund. Today, the vast majority of gifts go to a specific project or school. That's come with a change in mindset too, Seufferling said.

“Donors are much more interested in immediate results,” he said. “More immediate impact. In the past, there was much more of a feeling of ‘I’ll put a philanthropic gift in place and I trust good things will happen over time and it will have a positive impact.’

“Now they are more interested in seeing their philanthropy cause something to be improved or changed.”

While more dollars without donor restrictions would give both Endowment and the university more financial flexibility, Seuferling doesn’t think the change in mindset has been a negative. He credits the new mindset as a big reason why donation totals have increased dramatically over the decades. In the last 40 years, annual donations to KU have increased about 10 times the rate of inflation, according to some quick math. So, anyone who is interested in trying to reverse the trend of donors giving less for specific projects and more for general university operations is likely going down the wrong path.

“I doubt there would be anything that would reverse that trend,” Seuferling said.

Other trends, however, have changed. For the longest time, KU and its scholarship strategy focused heavily on attracting National Merit Scholars. Now, KU spends much more time working to create scholarship opportunities for students who haven’t been able to afford college or have had other hurdles placed between them and higher education, he said.

The focus on helping the research side of the university also has grown. Research and how it can help the state’s economy produce more jobs and investment has become a powerful tool to mine additional state support for the university. Plus, as universities across the country — including KU — struggle to grow undergraduate enrollments, the research dollars a university can attract have become more important to its overall standing and the impact it can have in the community.

That’s why — in addition to the warning about shifting athletic conferences — Seuferling said another event KU must guard against is losing membership in the Association of American Universities, which is generally regarded as the leading group of research universities in North America. When Texas and Oklahoma leave the Big 12 — coupled with Iowa State’s recent departure from the AAU — KU will be the only Big 12 school that is a member of the group. At various times, there have been worries that KU might fall out of the group, which

closely watches both the amount and type of research funding a university garners.

“I think it is a threat and one we always have to recognize and keep in mind,” Seufferling said of the possibility of falling out of the organization. But he also said he’s been encouraged by the amount of progress KU has made in growing its research portfolio.

In what will be one of Seufferling’s final projects, KU Endowment gave the university \$12 million to sponsor a research contest that awarded a series of \$3 million grants to KU faculty members who came up with new projects that could attract large amounts of future research grants. An even larger project that will stretch well into the tenure of Seufferling’s successor is KU Endowment’s role in KU Innovation Park. The west campus project is designed to build multiple research/office buildings that will house university research but also private enterprises. It all will be surrounded by housing and commercial development, which KU Endowment will construct as the master developer of the project.

“We’ve looked at that land and for ways that it can really energize and be additive to the university,” Seufferling said of the west campus property that KU Endowment has long owned. “It is just an opportunity waiting for the right time, and now is the right time.”

One idea that hasn’t changed much over the years is that KU Endowment doesn’t own a stable of white horses. In other words, the organization can’t afford to ride in on a stallion and save every day. Unlike a horse that can be ridden again the next day, spending dollars that have taken decades to accumulate is a tougher task to repeat.

“If you spend it all on that first crisis year, you are out of the business in the future,” Seufferling said.

That said, there are few organizations in Lawrence that can match the spending power of KU Endowment, if push comes to shove. At the beginning of the pandemic, Seufferling acknowledges there was jostling. KU Endowment ended up giving KU a \$33 million grant, which in part was designed to help the university through the pandemic. Seufferling said KU Endowment was prepared to give more, if the federal government had not come through with significant grant dollars to help higher education.

“Early in the pandemic, the chancellor and I had real conversations about what might be needed for KU to meet payroll,” Seuferling said. “It was very real.”

The fact KU Endowment would have been able to meet the need could be seen as an end-of-career testament to the big dollars that Seuferling has helped produce — \$300 million a year in donations, nearly \$3 billion in assets and several other sizable numbers that look good on a resume or a plaque.

But, for the most part, it largely has been other people who have been touting those numbers as Seuferling makes his farewell tour. At the Lied Center, the number Seuferling highlighted for the crowd was significantly smaller — \$39,000.

Seuferling said one of the first real projects he worked on for KU Endowment upon his arrival in 1981 was to travel to the home of a donor family who lived near the small town of Auburn in southern Shawnee County.

When Seuferling started with KU Endowment, he was in public relations rather than fundraising. He had his degree in journalism, had worked briefly in the radio business and liked telling stories. How that was going work at KU Endowment, though, wasn’t always clear.

“My mother asked me, ‘They pay you to do what? Is that a real job?’” Seuferling recalled.

The family members Seuferling went to talk to actually were the children of a woman who had died some years earlier. She had left the estate to her children, but had made KU a contingency recipient, meaning if her heirs decided they didn’t need the inheritance, it could go to KU.

Indeed, the children decided they would rather see the money go to KU, and a \$39,000 medical research fund was established. That’s the one donation Seuferling chose to tell his retirement reception crowd about. Yes, it is a nice example of how a gift can have surprising impact. The fund still exists today. It has more than \$400,000 in assets and has distributed more than \$500,000 to researchers.

But that is not why Seuferling remembers it so well. Yes, it was his first project, but that’s not really why he’s recalled it either. Rather, it was during that interview with those now grown children talking about how happy this would make their departed mother that an important thought struck Seuferling.

“It had an indelible impact on me about people’s philanthropy and their wish to do good for others,” Seuferling said. “I thought, I want to get out there and be among those people.”

KU is supposed to be a place that spurs important thoughts. On that day, it would begin benefiting from one for the next four decades.



photo by: Chad Lawhorn/Journal-World

University of Kansas Chancellor Douglas Girod and retiring KU Endowment President Dale Seuferling pose with a gift KU gave to Seuferling for his years of service.

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