Business Leadership Awards: From graduate student to CEO, Albert Wright has transformed rural health outcomes

by John Stuart Shaver STRATEGY NEWS EDITOR Feb 23, 2022 1 Zoned by read

WVU Medicine President and CEO Albert Wright conversses with former WVU President E. Gordon Gee.
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MORGANTOWN, W.Va. — When he was first in school to become a pharmacist, WVU Medicine President and CEO Albert Wright never dreamed that one day he would be in charge of an organization that employs more than 35,000 people.

After growing up in Conneaut, Ohio, Wright graduated from pharmacy school at the University of Toledo and going into his college experience and his pharmacy work thereafter, Wright developed a sense of appreciation for the small community hospitals in which he worked.

After a few years, Wright went back to school and finished a graduate program in health care administration at The Ohio State University.

"All of my education focused on pharmacy or public health or leadership skills," Wright said. "When you're young and looking at options, nobody ever says, 'Do you want to be a CEO?' It just never happens. I didn't even know I was in pharmacy school, my goal was to be a clinically focused pharmacist (and later to) become a director of pharmacists. . . .

"When you work in small hospitals, you don't usually not a tremendous number of skilled and experienced leaders in those institutions. When I did become a director, pharmacist director, when peer departments were struggling — maybe the man who ran the lab departed — you'd go and run the lab for a while. You got to know the different areas of the health system."

Throughout his time substituting in other areas while maintaining his pharmaceutical duties, Wright soon realized those critical tenets of health care leadership. Managing people, managing a budget and working collaboratively with medical staff.

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Wright further developed his administrative skills at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, and was finally hired as WVU Medicine's president and CEO in August 2014.

Although he may not have taken the traditional path to health care leadership, Wright said that every day, he's still getting to accomplish the goals he had when he first decided to be a pharmacist.

"I run a very large, complicated organization, but the asset we produce is ultimately there for people in their time of need," Wright said. "I always worked in nonprofit organizations for the most part, and that comes with a higher calling and responsibility than just producing a financial bottom line. It's always fit well with my personality, and I've enjoyed the opportunity of being the balance of making sure we're a high-quality, financially stable organization that's growing while staying true to our mission of improving the health trajectory of the state of West Virginia."

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In the nearly 12 years since Wright became WVU Medicine's leader, the organization has seen substantial growth, not only expanding its reach into more communities across West Virginia and beyond, but investing hundreds of millions of dollars into West Virginia hospitals to ensure they are best equipped to take care of patients.

Wright said that West Virginia has historically had "challenging health care outcomes," and through both growing WVU Medicine's population health footprint and expanding the research and services available at the organization's hub in Morgantown, he believes that he and his 35,000 employees are tackling those challenges head-on across 25 — soon to be 30 — counties.

"The way I approach my role evolves over time as we become a larger organization," he said. "It's always very important to surround yourself with the best and brightest people, and if there's one thing we've done over the last decade, it's attracting some of the best leaders in their field that you can imagine, and they have a tremendous commitment to improving the health of the communities. As we get larger, I've had to make sure that I'm able to stay on what my focus is as CEO and to give the great leaders around me the autonomy to do what they need to do."

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Wright's approach, administrative skills and commitment to improving West Virginia's health care saw him named the Large Business CEO of the Year in the 2020 West Virginia Leadership Business Awards.

Wright said that he was grateful and humbled to receive the honor, but noted that he does not celebrate the success in isolation.

"I really believe I have the best health care system CEO job in the country," Wright said. "Any time a CEO receives an honor like this, it's really just a recognition of how spectacular their team is. This is a team award, which I have the privilege of receiving. The job of any CEO is to support their team, and we have 35,000 people who come to work every day and do amazing things to take care of our patients. I'm very thankful to them."

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