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RCC narrows presidential candidate field to six

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Mary Dolan

Rockingham Community College has narrowed its search for a new president to six candidates, all of whom will be visiting the campus in the next few weeks for interviews and public meet-and-greets.

Outgoing President Robert Keys announced in July his intent to retire, effective at the beginning of next year. The college's Board of Trustees has been processing applications and has narrowed the field of candidates to six.

The six finalists include one internal candidate, three from other schools in North Carolina and two out-of-state candidates. None of the finalists are currently serving as a president elsewhere.

The six final candidates are:

Angela Ballentine, senior vice president at Vance-Granville Community College in Henderson since 2007.

Gene Couch, director of the Title III Program at Southwestern Community College in Sylva since September 2010.

Bradley Ebersole, vice chancellor for academic affairs at Baton Rouge Community College in Baton Rouge, La., since 2005.

Michael Helmick, vice president for academic affairs at Western Piedmont Community College in Morganton since 2007.

Vernon Lawter, Jr., provost/vice president of the Citrus Campus of the College of Central Florida since 2006.

Sheila Ruhland, vice president of instruction at Rockingham Community College since 2007.

The board will be interviewing Couch, Ballentine and Lawter Dec. 20, Dec. 21 and Dec. 22, respectively. The board will then interview Ebersole, Helmick and Ruhland Jan. 4, Jan. 5

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and Jan. 6, respectively.

During each day of interviews, faculty and staff members are being invited to meet the candidates. Also, from 4 p.m. until 5:30 p.m. each interview day, the public will be invited to attend a meet-and-greet session to get to know the finalists.

Keys said while there is not a universal process for conducting a presidential search, he said public input is usually a factor.

“Most of them do have some component of input or exposure to the community,” he said.

He commended the board on inviting the public to be a part of the process. This next step of interviews, coupled with meet-and-greets, will further introduce to the public those hoping to serve as the school’s next president.

“This will give a chance for the entire community ... to stop over and meet the candidates as they come through,” he said.

During Keys’ hiring 15 years ago, the board did not hold meet-and-greet sessions with the general public, but Keys was taken throughout the county to meet various community leaders, he said.

Keys has asked to be removed from the hiring process, leaving the decision-making to the board. Keys said he is familiar with four of the six candidates and believes they are highly qualified.

“I do believe the six final candidates represent a very strong pool,” he said.

Keys originally intended to leave his post at the end of December. The board has asked him to stay on board through February to allow time for his successor to step in, and Keys has agreed. The idea, Keys said, is to avoid complicating matters by having to hire an interim for a short time.

“I certainly want to help out in the transition process,” he said.

Keys said he hopes the college will have a new president in place by March 1.

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