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RCC hires current VP at Western Piedmont Community College Rockingham Community College announces new president

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Mary Dolan

Six months after Rockingham Community College's president announced his plans to retire, the school's Board of Trustees announced Tuesday afternoon outgoing President Robert Keys' successor.

Michael Helmick, currently serving as vice president for academic affairs at Western Piedmont Community College in Morganton, will take over as president of the college, starting March 1, according to school officials.

Helmick was one of six candidates the board placed on a short list for the position and invited to the school for interviews, meetings with faculty and staff members and public meet-and-greet sessions. The six candidates visited the school over the span of three weeks at the end of December and early January.

During his public session, Helmick spoke of the diverse career experiences he said thinks make him well-suited for the position. He has spent 15 years in the community college setting, has taught in public schools and has owned and operated a small business.

Helmick, who earned a doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from East Tennessee State University, received his first degree – an associate's – from the University of South Florida. Helmick spoke highly of the benefits of starting out at a community college.

Prior to coming to Western Piedmont in 2007, Helmick held his first vice presidency at the Technical College of the Low Country in South Carolina for two years. He previously worked for Northeast State Technical Community College and Walters State Community College in Tennessee.

Helmick revealed during his public session that he has economic development experience he would like to put to use in Rockingham County.

Helmick said much of his experience has been very hands-on, particularly while in Tennessee; there, he was part of a team that met regularly with new industries and inquired about their needs. Not only were needs translated into school courses, but in one case Helmick was tapped to teach math by an auto manufacturing facility that realized employee

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math skills were not up to par.

“We were there to fulfill a need,” Helmick said of going in at 5:30 a.m., between shift changes, to teach those courses on site.

Additionally, Helmick highlighted a manufacturers’ association he has helped develop while with Western Piedmont that now meets regularly. The association enabled the college to be more in tune with community needs, as well as providing an opportunity for local businesses to network and tap into one another’s offerings rather than seeking out-of-town or out-of-state resources.

Helmick also discussed some innovative programs being offered at Western Piedmont, including pottery, fine arts and a sustainable agriculture program that is in the beginning stages.

Helmick said he would hope to steer RCC in helping turn the economic climate around.

“This college is one of the best things going in this county,” he said, “and perhaps the best road to recovery.”

Board Chair Barbara Moore said Tuesday the board placed a great deal of emphasis on listening to employees of the college about the six contenders for the presidency.

“There was an open line to the trustees,” Moore said. “And of course, that carried a lot of weight with the trustees.”

Keys announced in July his intent to retire. The board then hired a 21-member presidential search advisory committee, composed of members of the community, which narrowed the pool of 45 applicants to the six finalists.

The other five candidates were: Angela Ballentine, senior vice president at Vance-Granville Community College in Henderson; Gene Couch, director of the Title III Program at Southwestern Community College in Sylva; Bradley Ebersole, vice chancellor for academic affairs at Baton Rouge Community College in Louisiana, Vernon Lawter Jr., provost/vice president of the Citrus Campus of the College of Central Florida and Sheila Ruhland, vice president of instruction at Rockingham Community College.

The board’s selection of Helmick does require final approval by the State Board of Community Colleges. Helmick will be the college’s fourth president.

“I think that he has a unique set of skills and experiences, including 10 years’ experience as a small business owner,” Moore said. “He also has a very strong background in technical education and training ... and under his presidency, the trustees believe that our businesses and industry in Rockingham County will view the college as the place to go for innovative training, state-of-the-art technological practices, the latest health care training and instruction on the most up-to-date methods of production.”

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