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Charting a course for growth at Middlesex Community College

New at MCC helm, James Mabry's out to build partnerships

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LOWELL -- James Mabry does not have a magical 90-day plan to enact as he settles into his new position as president of Middlesex Community College.

Instead, the Arizona transplant is spending his initial days immersing himself in the community -- much in the way his predecessor Carole Cowan has done.

"What I take from her is a very positive, very can-do attitude," Mabry said on his second week in office. "One that is very open to creative ideas and is open to thinking creatively about how we can work with a broad range of partners within the communities that we serve."

Mabry's oversight of the college includes continuing its expansion efforts, picking up the baton that Cowan carried for 24 years as president.



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AN AMBITIOUS ASSIGNMENT: "We really want to break down the disparities in success between different groups," said new Middlesex Community College President James Mabry. "We want all people to come in and be able to succeed in this environment." SUN / RYAN MCBRIDE

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That growth includes a \$14.5 million effort to renovate the old Boston and Maine Railroad Depot downtown within the next two years, transforming it into an academic-arts building.

Meanwhile, a new biotechnology building at the Bedford campus is still in the planning phases, and the school has yet to decide what to do with another \$10 million it received from the state for a new academic space in Lowell.

"It's all part of the college's continued investment in both campuses, and specifically in investing in the development of Lowell," Mabry said. "Working closely with the city and organizations within the city to really help make this a premier gateway city.

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Middlesex Community College President James Mabry stands outside MCC's Federal Building in downtown Lowell last Monday. He took the reins from Carole Cowan, who led the school for 24 years. SUN / RYAN MCBRIDE

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As vice provost of academic affairs at Mesa Community College in Arizona, Mabry took charge of 150 degree programs, curriculum and scheduling. At Middlesex -- much smaller than Mesa's 23,000 students -- Mabry says he will continue focusing on student success, retention and graduation.

"I think my real strong background in teaching and learning, which is essentially the core mission of the college, is something I'm both very familiar with and very fond of," he said.

But one difference from his former vice provost role, he said, is that the presidency brings a much more external focus.

"The president's position is more focused on building external relations while also providing overall strategic leadership for the college," he said.

And in the community- relations realm, his predecessor leaves big shoes to fill. Cowan, who began at MCC as a teacher in 1976, garnered relationships with UMass Lowell to strengthen the academic transition between schools.

She was also praised for her relationships with the police force and the city, and oversaw the school's acquisition of the Federal Building downtown and the historic John Nesmith House.

That range of relationships is the very thing that attracted Mabry to the position.

"We have here a tremendous base of strong relationships and it's really up to me to foster and nurture those relationships," he said.

Mabry noted one of the college's greatest challenges will be to extend higher education to a broader range of people.

"We really want to break down the disparities in success between different groups," he said. "We want all people to come in and be able to succeed in this environment."

And although President Barack Obama's proposal for a free two years of community college could help with affordability, Mabry is not banking on that idea.

"I think that with all proposals in Washington, D.C., no sane person is going to hold their breath waiting for it to happen," he said. "But it certainly has helped raise the visibility of community colleges."

Remedial education is another issue for community colleges, as high school classes churn out a number of students who aren't able to test into credit-bearing courses.

Mabry saw the same issue in Arizona, and argued that it's a national issue.

"That tells you we have some systemic issues to deal with. It's not a local problem," he said. "You can't turn around and blame a high school and blame a school system."

But he praised MCC's initiative with Lowell High School, which offers test prep for seniors so they don't receive poor scores on the placement test.

In the first few months, Mabry will be connecting with the community.

"It's really an opportunity for me, within that period of time, to get to know and to get to understand the college and the communities that it serves," he said, "so that then we can work together to form programs that will really help our students succeed."

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