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Mabry approved as MCC president

By Grant Welker, gwelker@lowellsun.com

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BOSTON -- James Mabry was confirmed as the new Middlesex Community College president by the state Board of Higher Education Tuesday, and will become the college's fourth leader in February.

Mabry, the vice president of academic affairs for Mesa Community College in Arizona, will be Middlesex's first new president since Carole Cowan was appointed to the position in 1990.

Cowan plans to remain with the school as a board member for the college foundation.

"I have big shoes to fill" replacing Cowan, Mabry said, adding that they've talked regularly and plan to continue doing so. "She'll be a huge asset."

While trustees have said they can't exactly replace Cowan, they have praised Mabry as the clear favorite among the few dozen candidates interviewed for the position.

"Dr. Mabry rose to the top at every level," trustee James Hicks said. Middlesex's board of trustees chose Mabry unanimously last week.

Administrators at Mesa Community College also praised Mabry in interviews Tuesday.

"He is very dedicated to the community college mission," said Mesa President Shouan Pan, who hired Mabry soon after taking office. "He understands what we do and always comes to the office energized."

Mabry is student-oriented enough that he's been known to buy suits for students who need one for an important engagement but don't have one, Pan said. In hiring him in 2008, Pan said, Mabry "emerged very quickly as one of the outstanding candidates."

"He will leave a big hole here," Pan said.

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James Mabry, third from left, was unanimously confirmed as Middlesex Community College's new president Tuesday by the state Board of Higher Education. With Mabry are, from left, MCC trustees Tim Glaser, James Hicks and Paul Means. sun / Grant Welker

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"Middlesex is certainly very fortunate to have him."

Roger Yohe, Mesa's dean of instruction in the office of the vice president of academic affairs, called Mabry approachable, transparent, deliberate and someone who believes in "collective intelligence." He prefers to put an idea out and have a broad discussion to come to the best result, Yohe said.

"You won't find him as a top-down leader," he said. Mabry, he said, frequently mentors students and follows up with them even after they leave the college. He's never seen him lose his composure, in public or private.

"But I hope people don't confuse being approachable, and that smile, for weakness," Yohe said. "He's tough. He's fair."

The upstate New York native -- who has been in Arizona since 2008 and was in Florida for two years before that -- joked about missing having to dress in layers, or having to scrape ice off his windshield. He had been living in warm states long enough that he recently had to shop in the Phoenix area for a winter jacket.

After having lived in New York, London and Tokyo, "it's culturally more at home for me" being back in the Northeast, he said. He will also be closer to the couple's two daughters, who are both in Washington.

Mabry's nearly entire career has been spent in community colleges. "It took about three weeks and I knew I was home," he said of his first community college teaching position, where he said he enjoyed the mission and working with a diverse population of students.

He is tentatively scheduled to start at Middlesex Feb. 16.

Mabry's confirmation Tuesday came without any dissension. It was a quiet end to what hadn't always been a smooth process.

Four of Middlesex's 11 trustees initially voted last week to reverse the search process to come up with more finalists. After that vote failed, they recommended Mabry unanimously. But a day after the vote, trustees Chairman Royall Mack, who also led the search committee, resigned after recent reports brought up inaccuracies in his own resume.

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