On a course for growth

FLCC president Barbara Risser aims to double enrollment

By NATE DOUGHERTY

The dictionary defines emergent as “arising and existing only as a phenomenon of independent parts working together.” Barbara Risser also sees it as the one tree that grows above the others in a grove.

For Risser, the president of Finger Lakes Community College, the school is emergent, blooming through well-articulated plans to grow enrollment and academic programs with the nurture and input of all its stakeholders. When the school released its 2008-2013 strategic plan in August, she titled it “Emergent Potential.”

“We wanted a really unique name for our plan,” Risser, 57, says. “I think that name gets at the way we’re approaching things. We can’t have a bunch of independent parts out there doing their thing, so that means college and community need to work together.”

Becoming emergent will mean significant growth for the school. There are plans to expand the offerings at its campus centers and create a new center in Victor. Within 10 years the school wants enrollment to double, and new academic programs are planned.

FLCC had 5,750 students enrolled this fall, with 3,121 attending full time and 2,629 part time. Risser oversees 113 full-time faculty, 202 part-time faculty and roughly 175 staffers. The college has an operating budget of $33.8 million for the 2008-09 academic year.

Since taking over the FLCC presidency in June 2007, Risser has dedicated her work to keeping those independent parts moving seamlessly forward. In the weeks before she started, Risser read every academic and accreditation study on FLCC she could get her hands on—including an entire box full of information the school sent her.

As president, Risser went to work listening to faculty, administrators and community leaders to form a consensus on where the school should go. She wrote e-mail updates frequently and started a blog on the school’s Web site. In the school library is a box where students or faculty can write suggestions for topics to be covered at the regular college forums she holds.

“It’s nice to have things to keep people updated, but if there’s not a way for them to respond that’s not really communication,” Risser says. “The box in the library allows me to listen to what people have to say and are concerned about rather than just dictating to them what we’re doing.”

To help determine what would be the school’s main goals, she held 18 open meetings in the fall of 2007. One of the most common concerns she heard both internally and externally was the need to better connect with the community.

“We have our main campus in Hopewell, but our campus center in Geneva is a very different community than Canandaigua,” Risser says. “We also have a center in Newark that also serves rural areas of Wayne County, along with Victor and the high-tech corridor there.

“We serve four main communities, and when we look at it that way we understand
that if our real mission is in serving those areas, we have to be growing efforts at our campus centers.”

Part of the strategic plan includes increasing the course load at those satellite campuses, allowing students to take nearly all the courses needed for a degree. Construction is under way on the 26,000-square-foot campus center in Victor that will serve as the science and technology hub for the college.

Gaining the support of elected officials plays an important role in Risser’s plan for growth. After showing up at the Ontario County Board of Supervisors meeting every month to update them on the school’s progress and take questions, the clerk finally made her part of the regular meeting schedule. She also leads tours of the campus for local supervisors, pointing out areas where the school has outgrown its 1972 infrastructure and where renovations will bring new classrooms and administrative offices.

“It’s one thing to have a resolution in front of you at a meeting, but it’s another to actually be able to see what you’re voting on and what the money will be going for,” says Risser, who also keeps close ties to the community through her involvement with the Finger Lakes Workforce Investment Board and the Community and Government Affairs Committee of the Canandaigua Chamber of Commerce.

Her work paid off this summer when the board of supervisors passed legislation to raise the county’s property tax from 7.125 percent to 7.5 percent, helping to fund roughly $24 million for the college’s growth plans. The efforts she has taken to involve all the school’s stakeholders on the planning process were not lost on those voting.

THEODORE FAFINSKI, Farmington town supervisor and chairman of the board of supervisors, says so many people had input into the strategic plan that all came away feeling it was their plan in a way.

“Barbara Risser is sort of a Teddy Roosevelt-type person,” Fafinski says. “She speaks softly but carries a big stick in the form of well-planned, well-documented actions. The supervisors in Ontario County have never been as well-informed on what’s going on at the college as we are now, and that’s a credit to her.”

Her background

Risser’s rise to FLCC president also could be described as emergent.

As a professor of English at Onondaga Community College near Syracuse for 20 years, she had no plans to leave teaching. That changed when she began working with the school’s new president as chairwoman of the faculty. While the two worked together they realized they had many shared visions for the school’s future, and Risser was named associate vice president of academics in 2001.

She faced immediate challenges. After making the transition to the post over the summer, she came to realize that class schedules were in disarray with some courses containing only a handful of students. When faculty returned in the fall, the first interaction with professors in her new capacity was to tell them many classes had to be canceled.

“People I had worked with for 20 years were looking at me like all of a sudden I was going over to the other side,” Risser says. But two decades as a professor helped her stay connected to the school’s core mission and gave her a perspective she could not have gained had she traveled a different career path.

“I think being on the faculty so long is tremendously helpful,” Risser says. “You understand an academic institution when you come out of the faculty and I really do understand that’s the heart of the college.”

“A president who comes to the school from the financial side has a different perspective, and for me it’s all about what happens in the classroom.”

As a professor teaching classes on reading and effective study skills, Risser was known for her ability to bring together all students, no matter how reluctant, in moving forward with their education.

Deborah Irwin, Risser’s colleague in the English department at OCC who co-authored a textbook on reading skills with her, says this quiet but unyielding temperament served her well in the transition to administration.

“She had an amazing ability to win them over and make them see what direction they needed to go to become better students,” Irwin says. “Within our faculty we were always joking about the new ideas she came up with for approaches to take or programs to implement. The opportunity to serve in an administrative role really let loose that creativity.”

Three years after taking her first administrative position, she was promoted to vice president for student and academic services, where she oversaw all aspects of academic and student life, including community outreach and enrollment management. It was then, at the suggestion of the OCC president, she began to go back to school full time to get her doctorate in higher education management.

Just as she finished her degree at the University of Pennsylvania, Risser first began to seriously consider becoming a college president. It also happened to be the same time FLCC’s presidency came open, a position many colleagues within the SUNY system suggested she go for.

“A lot of people their whole life want to be college president,” Risser says. “It was not something in my plans at all, but has turned out to be a wonderful match.”

Looking ahead

The plans Risser helped craft at FLCC are as ambitious as they are specific. Divided into four categories—learning and student success, strategic growth, efficient and effective operations, and community value—nearly every individual goal is measured against a specific benchmark.

Even a vague and hard-to-measure concept such as increasing the college’s cultural and economic impact on the service area is studied carefully. Every year, a 50-person group of community members reviews six benchmarks of community value using a four-point scale to determine how close to its goal FLCC has come.

But in reaching this goal, it is not just important to Risser that the school be responsive to the communities it serves—she wants local employers’ needs to shape the curriculum. As the school makes more inroads around Victor, she has been in contact with employers of high-tech businesses to know exactly what skills they need from students.

“We heard such a consistent message that there are good jobs out there in the蝙蝠侠的超级英雄世界。”
high-tech sector for workers with good technical background and versatile skills,” Risser says. “So along with them we created a program based on problem solving that takes an interdisciplinary approach to technology. It’s very hands-on and will actually get the students out into internships with these companies.”

The needs of local winemakers and a dearth of similar programs in the area has led to the creation of a viticulture and enology program at FLCC, which Risser says will be ready to launch next academic year along with the technology program. The program will take students through the science of grape production and winemaking.

The academic programs fit with another goal: increasing enrollment to or above 5,490 by the 2012-13 school year, an increase of 55 percent from 2006-07.

“You understand an academic institution when you come out of the faculty and I really do understand that’s the heart of the college.”

“We see all kinds of ways to reach out to meet the needs of the business community that allows growth to just follow that,” Risser says.

As the school reaches its five-year goals and the process of renewing goals or aiming higher starts again, Risser says one of her biggest challenges will be maintaining the balance of the independent parts needed to stay emergent.

“I found that the most precious thing I have in this job is time,” Risser says. “Finding the best way to use my time when I’m listening to people and community outreach and planning has been the biggest learning curve. There are all those different directions to go, and it’s a balancing act in making sure it’s always moving forward.”

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