



Posted: Monday, August 19, 2013 12:00 pm | Updated: 5:11 pm, Sat Aug 24, 2013.

New River Valley president plans to let students guide path to growth, improvement By KAITLIN MULHERE Sentinel Staff

Alicia B. Harvey-Smith's passion for her new job is infectious, like her nearly nonstop smile.

And why wouldn't it be?

She says she's doing what she loves — investing in the power of higher education to transform students, their communities and the world.

She's looking forward to a new adventure at the age of 51, after leaving her lifelong home state of Maryland for western New Hampshire.

And she's psyched about leading Claremont-based River Valley Community College, the first time she's served as president of a school.

"Maybe I'm an eternal optimist," she said. "But I am excited by education, and I'm excited by seeing students, just, transform."

Born and raised in Baltimore, Harvey-Smith was educated at and worked solely at Maryland schools, until now.

Before coming to River Valley, she was vice president for student affairs at Baltimore City Community College, a school that serves roughly 19,000 students.

She now oversees a much smaller population at River Valley — about 1,100 students between its Claremont campus and its Keene Academic Center. Yet Harvey-Smith said she saw this position as an opportunity to help grow the community college and its programs.

"To be quite honest, I think I can make a difference here," she said.

Harvey-Smith's first job in schools was as a 6th- and 12th-grade special education teacher. As she watched students with learning challenges start to understand a concept and saw the light bulb go off, Harvey-Smith said her own light bulb went off, and she knew her home was going to be in education.

Still, she says she was always looking for ways to work with students more effectively, to make that light bulb shine more regularly, and so she returned to school to study counseling.

She earned a master's degree in education with a focus on guidance and counseling from Johns Hopkins University, and later earned a doctorate in counseling from the University of Maryland, College Park.

Through those degrees, she said she was taught to listen and put herself in the place of people she's working with.

"To me, it actually makes you a far more effective leader, because leaders who understand, or seek to understand the individuals that they're working with, tend to, I think, be more effective," she said.

At River Valley, Harvey-Smith is planning a series of listening tours to hear what community members, students and business leaders want from their community college.

She'll combine that with an academic assessment she's conducting over the next few months, where she'll examine the school's course list and how students perform in certain subjects to find ways to improve the college's offerings.

"The great thing about community colleges is we're designed to be responsive and flexible, so it doesn't take us as long to change, if you will," she said.

She also plans to work with her administrative team to develop a strategic enrollment plan, which will help the community college set targets for recruiting and retaining students.

Student retention is one of Harvey-Smith's favorite research topics, and an area that many community colleges struggle with as a large portion of their students have other priorities, such as full-time jobs or children.

Harvey-Smith was drawn to the topic years ago after talking with students who'd share stories on the variety of reasons why they'd quit school.

She started studying student developmental theory to find out why students make the decisions they do, including dropping out, and what things interfere with them being able to complete an academic degree, she said.

On that note, River Valley has to continue the push to keep education affordable, so students can focus on learning without financial stressors, Harvey-Smith said. She'd like to improve the community college's relationship with business partners to provide scholarships and workforce development opportunities.

Harvey-Smith spends her free time writing and has published books on setting up students for academic success and collaborating in higher education. She's recently finished a leadership book titled "CARE: Compassion, Appreciation, Respect and Empowerment — Essential Leadership Standards."

"My philosophy is that everyone's a leader, and you can lead from your sphere of influence," she said. "So, it doesn't matter what position you hold, there are people that are looking to you and expecting you to lead."

In addition to her research topics, she also writes poetry. At a recent completion ceremony for a River Valley program, Harvey-Smith read aloud from her motivational poetry book, encouraging the students to close their eyes and envision their ideal future.

She's been married for 29 years, and she and her husband, Donald, enjoy traveling, and they're looking forward to exploring Claremont and the surrounding communities, Harvey-Smith said.

Although it's been several years since Harvey-Smith has been a traditional teacher, she still refers to those taking classes at the schools she's worked at as "my" students. Even as an administrator, she said she's always made it a priority to stay connected the people she's serving, so she'll walk around campus and get to know students' names and academic goals.

She also plans to form a student advisory council that she'll meet with regularly to hear about how students are experiencing the campus, and she'll let students guide the community college's changes.

"Just as a compass would point the way, listen to your students," she said. "They'll tell you what's working and they'll tell you what's not."

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