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Our View: Interim UWSP chancellor looks to future

Mark Nook has a history with the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.

His daughter graduated from UWSP years before he took over as the institution's interim chancellor on June 1. He was working at St. Cloud (Minn.) State University, and tells the Stevens Point Journal Editorial Board he wasn't looking to leave.

But he immediately liked UWSP after bringing his daughter to school here. He liked the relationship UWSP had with the community and the care and concern its staff showed for his daughter.

"It wasn't about changing jobs. It was about becoming a member of the UWSP community," he said.

Nook started as a provost at the university two year ago. He stepped into his role as interim chancellor at a difficult time. Embattled former Chancellor Linda Bunnell resigned in April after her crash with a parked car turned into a cascading series of accusations by prominent critics that left her unable to govern at the school.

While he acknowledged that the university saw a "rocky several months," he said he has made an effort to reach out to different members of the community to find out what happened and to make sure those relationships are on a firm footing.

At the same time, Nook is working to position UWSP for the future. The university is creating a strategic plan, which will consider everything from the optimal size of its student body to the direction of curriculum to future construction projects. That sort of long-range planning is not something the university has undertaken recently, Nook said, and it's worthwhile.

Demographic data suggest that higher education in general is moving into a time of transition. According to projections by the UW System, the number of Wisconsin high school graduates peaked in 2008 at about 71,000 students. It will decline through 2015, when fewer than 63,000 students will graduate.

Although there are fewer graduates, a larger proportion go on to higher education than have in the past.

Still, it's likely that competition for students will increase.

Demographics also show that the university population is becoming more diverse, and is likely to become more so. African-American and Asian populations will make up a larger proportion of the student body, and in particular numbers of Hispanic students are projected to climb steadily.

UWSP, like all higher learning institutions, will want to position itself with these changes in mind.

The partnerships Bunnell formed and built upon with Centergy, UW Marathon County, UW-Marshfield/Wood County and Wausau's Center for Leadership and Excellence and Economic Development will continue to strengthen UWSP. In addition to these, Nook should make it a priority to work with technical colleges and other schools to ease the path of transfer students, ensuring they can receive credits for the classes they have taken.

According to Nook, each of the last four years the university has admitted 100 more freshmen than the year before, and each year it has rejected more applications. That means the university is growing at the same time that the quality of its students is improving -- exactly the pattern it should seek to maintain.

Nook's interim appointment extends through June 30 of next year. As important as it is for him to smooth the hurt feelings and broken relationships that emerged at the end of Bunnell's time, moving forward from the bitterness is even more important.

"This can't be an interim year where we just mark time," Nook said.
