

The Hunt for a New President: Dr. Walt Tobin

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On April 13, at noon, the final student forum took place to help determine Dr. Frank Friedman's successor as president of PVCC. Dr. Walt Tobin, the last candidate to come to PVCC, took open and pre-set questions for 50 minutes in the Bolick Student Center. He was wearing a suit and reddish bowtie, occasionally sipping water.

Tobin is currently the president of Orangeburg Calhoun Technical College in South Carolina. Tobin has been in education for over 20 years and has a doctorate in Education Administration from the University of South Carolina.

Student leader Hadrien Padilla ran the predetermined questions and asked them for the first part of the student forum, and for the last part, available students asked questions of their own. The event was also being shown over Zoom, so people could interact there as well.

"We are here to serve the needs of the students," Tobin said. He explained that it is important to have the right environment for students and teachers alike so people can learn and grow as effectively as possible.

He said he wants to reduce the number of students in developmental programs and lessen the amount of time people are in those programs. He also stressed several times that the faculty, facilities, and students must have the right resources to help them succeed, especially on the first day of school. He has proposed ideas such as "mandatory orientation courses," so that "students start right" and have "access to materials on the first day." He believes "students should feel welcome and supported" and "emergency funds" should be available to students. He thinks partnering with community organizations like the Salvation Army can help. He said that at Orangeburg Calhoun Technical College, "We have tried to make students feel supported."

He said the main roles for a president are to work to set and fulfill a vision for the college, create a good environment for people to learn and to take feedback from students and listen to them. He said, "I will be professional," and that student advice is important. If students feel something is needed at the college, he will find a way.

"As a college we are looking for a greater

sense of connection," Tobin remarked, saying that student success and connection are closely woven together. He said he likes to leave his office and meet with faculty and students.

One of his goals is "making an investment in ourselves" at the college. He said it is vital to keep good salaries for teachers and to create awards to push students and faculty forward. He wants to make sure the staff are just as invested in the process as the students. He asks himself, "Does it meet the needs of the students?"

When asked about students with bad internet that come from rural areas, he said that at Orangeburg Calhoun Technical College, "we had laptops that we would loan out" and 100 hotspots for students with bad or no internet. He did remark that hotspots could only do so much when some neighborhoods had so little reception.

One of his main points was the "focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion." Tobin intends to "set a vision." He said that "A vision is a shared experience." Many people help to create and sustain a college, not just the president. He explained the difference between equity and equality; "Equality is [when] everybody gets treated the same." Equity is about giving people what they need specific to their situation, not the same things as what everyone else needs.

The questions continued with open topics from the audience. When asked about better resources for people with disabilities, Tobin said, "Federal law requires us to [assist] students [with] needs." Tobin said that it is his job to give everyone with needs, both physical and mental, "all the tools [they] need to succeed." He made a point that he prioritizes the needs of all students.

Another open question touched on mental health. "Mental health is a thing for everybody." He said, "It has to come out of the shadows." Sometimes, people must take a break to keep their sanity, students and faculty alike. When talking about self-care he said, "If we don't feed ourselves, we can't feed others." He explained that "We all need somebody to talk [to]... we all have mental health issues."

More information about Tobin and the other presidential candidates can be found online. The pick for PVCC's new college president will be announced when all deliberations are finished.

Read the full article on Piedmontforum.com.