



# Bennington Banner

## SVC's acting president steps to the fore

Wednesday February 8, 2012

**DAWSON RASPUZZI**

*Staff Writer*

BENNINGTON -- James Beckwith has always accepted, if not favored, acting behind the scenes to ensure smooth operations. But when Southern Vermont College President Karen Gross began a one-year leave of absence to work with the U.S. Department of Education in Washington, D.C., last month, Beckwith stepped in as acting president and became the face of the private, liberal arts college.



The choice was logical, as he had served side by side with Gross as the chief financial officer and chief operating officer since 2007. With his experience and knowledge of the college, as well as a plan for the institution that has been in place, Beckwith's transition has been seamless.

"Because of my relationship with Karen there is very little I don't know," Beckwith said in an interview with the Banner Tuesday. "So the idea of being able to step into various situations ... just rolled."

Having known Gross for nearly 30 years, after first meeting her on the slopes of Stratton Mountain, Beckwith may be more familiar with the way the college has been led than anybody else on campus. It was Gross who convinced Beckwith to take the role of COO and CFO in her second year as president.

The mission and operations at SVC for the next year have been mapped out, and Beckwith said his goal is to stay on course.

"We don't have any big zig in mind. We're just on a natural trajectory, and we're just going to continue to move forward," Beckwith said. "We have a transition plan we put in place when Karen was here of things that as a senior team, we want to accomplish for the year, and we'll work our way through that. The idea is to hand her back an institution that is better, that has moved forward, but hasn't dramatically changed since she left."

That's not to say there will not be decisions carrying significant weight facing the acting president. Possibly one of the largest will be how to deal with an anticipated housing shortage on campus by fall of 2013. "We either need to build or we need to change who can live on campus," Beckwith said. "There is conversation with various developers about coming in and building some more dorms."

A decision is expected to be made within the next two months as to how the college will proceed.

Beckwith described himself as more "low key" than Gross and someone who will be seen wandering campus and often poking his head in offices and classrooms.

While continuing to fill the roles of CFO and COO, Beckwith has also become the face of the college, which brings additional obligations with it.

"I still do the day-to-day operations, but the presidential side (involves) more of the outside world," Beckwith said. "Now it's more meetings, like going over to Williamstown and meeting with funders about whether you can re-fund a program that we want to do and what's your appetite for doing more."

While working for the government, Gross may not weigh in on decisions involving the college. Without her insight, Beckwith is relying on his senior team made up of the provost, dean of students and human resource administrator to pick up more responsibilities.

"We work very closely together. We have meetings every week together, so we operate as a team," Beckwith said.

He is also in communication with members from the board of trustees on a daily basis.

The reason there will be a need for additional housing is in part because of Beckwith's work overseeing admissions since 2007, in which time enrollment has grown by 50 percent. Upon coming to SVC, he said, the admissions and financial aid departments were in disarray. Beckwith's leadership helped put in place operational aspects to better situate both departments with strong leaders that work hand-in-hand together.

One of Beckwith's responsibilities as acting president is also to increase enrollment -- based on the college's five-year plan -- from 550 to 575 to 600 by the fall. His efforts are now shifted toward recruiting at events, like a guidance counselor gathering in Boston he recently attended to shake hands and promote the environment at SVC. He said that welcomes a "vulnerable student population" looking for personalized services and close interactions with faculty.

Beckwith never planned to be a college president. In fact, he continues to use his own office for matters other than special meetings that gather in the presidential space still decorated with Gross' art, literature and knickknacks.

"This has never been an office I've coveted. This has never been an office I've wanted," Beckwith said. "I don't have an ego. I don't need to have this presidential title flowing around."

Prior to moving to Vermont, Beckwith spent 22 years as a managing partner for the New York office of Wolf, Block, Schorr and Solis-Cohen, where he headed the firm's financial and taxation department. He has also taught math, calculus and statistics at SVC and Stratton Mountain School.

Contact Dawson Raspuzzi at [draspuzzi@benningtonbanner.com](mailto:draspuzzi@benningtonbanner.com)