# Rutland Herald

## U.S. Education official welcomes students to Southern Vermont College in Bennington

Southern Vermont College's president, Karen Gross (left), and U.S. Undersecretary of Education Martha Kanter welcomed Southern Vermont College's freshman class Friday.

Patrick McArdle /Rutland Herald

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BENNINGTON — U.S. Undersecretary of Education Martha Kanter welcomed Southern Vermont College's incoming freshmen class of almost 200 students Friday, while also kicking off President Barack Obama's 2020 Initiative.

Kanter told the students and parents at the college's Mountaineer Gymnasium that the 2020 Initiative, also known as the American Graduation Initiative, seeks to increase not only the number of people who go to college but also improve the rate of college graduation.

"I think what Southern Vermont College means is, it's a place where it will happen for you, you will walk across the stage and you will join to us to meet what we're calling the 2020 Initiative," she said.

Kanter said she brought greetings from Obama and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan before explaining that the initiative's simple goal was to "make sure that everyone who enters college becomes a successful graduate."

Friday's event was part of orientation for incoming freshmen and included what Karen Gross, the college's president, said she believes is a ceremony unique to the small, independent college in which students are all given a copy of the same inspirational book signed by faculty and staff.

Kanter told the students she believed ceremonies like the one Friday are important to increase the value of the students' education by learning from each other as well as teachers.

"One of the reasons I wanted to come here was to let you know how important this college is and how important it is that everyone who's an entering freshman will do well … and then walk across that stage in four or five years. Things get in the way, I know, for some of you, but you will finish. I think the 2020 goal means completion to us and you will complete college. You will finish what

you start. It starts with that first step," she said.

At the end of the ceremony, Kanter said she had one more "ask" for the students. She asked each to find a friend with whom he or she could make an agreement for help and encouragement toward graduation.

Obama's initiative is intended to keep America's work force skilled and competitive.

The $12 billion proposal calls for adding 5 million new students to the list of those who graduate community colleges, for expansion of Pell Grants and college tax credits and for simplifying the application for student aid.

Gross has already begun Southern Vermont College's involvement by what she called the college's "Call to Action."

Gross sent a request this week to community, education and church leaders to encourage them to direct potentially successful college students to Southern Vermont College which has pledged to assist them in finding what kind of financial aid is available and helping choose the right school.

The college is also promoting the 2020 Initiative on campus to encourage students starting in August 2010 to stay in college until graduation.

Gross told the students Friday that the college would be serving a "Mocha Java 2020 Blast."

"I'm going to actually take the Mocha Java 2020 Blast concept back to the White House because I think it's very interesting idea to say 2020 blast, and does that mean something if you think about the fact that you've got years here to build the capacity to get the knowledge and information and graduate and will that 2020 blast, in your own way, help you do that," Kanter said.

After the "Bookends of Your Education" ceremony, Kanter said she hoped all of America's colleges will participate in the president's initiative but said small colleges had a vital role.

"What's exciting about (Southern Vermont College) is that it has a constellation of 500 students and is an intimate academic experience for each one of these students. Just watching the students and seeing that one had been a fireman and one was a phlebotomist, the variety and diversity of the people here, and the fact that they're coming to this place to get an education means that the college can play a huge role in making sure that they persist and become one of the 2020 graduates," she said.

Gross said she also thought the college's size could be an asset.

"There's 600 colleges like SVC, small, private colleges and we're places where students really can thrive. So if we can get it right here, we can be a role model for other small colleges," she said.

While in Vermont, Kanter is scheduled to visit Landmark College in Putney as part of the school's 25th anniversary.

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