

FOCUS 2008

REGION

A SPECIAL BUSINESS & INDUSTRY SUPPLEMENT TO THE WESTFIELD EVENING NEWS

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 29, 2008

WESTFIELD STATE COLLEGE 'Star of state college system'

By DAVE CANTON
Staff Writer

WESTFIELD — With barely five weeks under his belt as the president of Westfield State College, Dr. Eran Dobbelle doesn't have to look far to know he has walked into a good situation.

"The state of this college is good," he said earlier this week during an interview. "This school now has the highest entering SAT scores of any state college, the highest entering GPA and the highest retention rate. We have the highest percentage of teachers passing their certification testing: 98 percent. Fully 92 percent of our graduates are either working or in graduate school within one year of graduation, and 76 percent of our alumni remain in Massachusetts. More than 8,000 alumni continue to live here in Western Massachusetts."

"Westfield State College is the star of the state college system and we are able to compete for the best in both students and faculty."

Dobbelle acknowledges he cannot take credit for the current state of Westfield State College. That comes from a talented management team that has worked at the school a long time. Dobbelle said they do their jobs well, leaving him the freedom to do his job the best he can.

"Colleges tend to be over-managed and under-led. If you aspire to leadership, then lead. I can't micro manage what is already being done well. I'm a change guy," he said, describing his role at Westfield State College. "I'm here to lift and inspire people. This institution needs to be promoted, to get its story told. The kids who come here are from working class families, but they deserve every advantage that anyone attending a private college would get. This college provides an education of at least as good quality as any school and at an affordable price, a little over \$13,000 a year. You can get an entire degree from Westfield State College for



DR. EVAN DOBBELLE
Westfield State College President

what you would pay for one year of some private colleges. The education a student gets here is a fabulous investment — I didn't say it's a bargain, because that implies that the quality is less; it's not, it's an investment.

With the school operating well enough even before he came to Westfield, Dobbelle said he was not hired to be a manager. He was chosen by the trustees to take the school in new, exciting directions, and he fully intends to do just that.

"It's my job to tell the world about Westfield State College, to get them to visit, to get them to see a state college as socially acceptable. Once I can do that, then we will become an international presence."

The college has one of the largest Homeland Security departments anywhere. That's where the international part comes in, Dobbelle said. Westfield State College has specialized programs that can attract international attention and put Westfield on the map.

There are other areas Dobbelle said need attention. The faculty at Westfield State College, which he calls second to none, needs to be celebrated.

"I think we celebrate them by removing the bureaucratic hurdles in their way. They need the opportunity to travel, attend conferences, engage intellectually overseas. We need to make sure sabbaticals are timely and to make sure we do what we can to engage the faculty. At Westfield State College, the faculty is king. That's what makes a college. If we can't engage and challenge the faculty, how can they inspire the students?"

One of the president's bricks and mortar initiatives coming in the door is to improve the campus infrastructure. The campus will be completely Wi-Fi by September of 2008, he said, and he hopes to launch a renovation program. Dobbelle said the buildings on campus are, in some cases, decades old. He is pushing a program to update and improve educational facilities. That effort will be enhanced by Governor Deval Patrick's proposal to bond \$2 billion to upgrade the state's higher education system. Dobbelle said Westfield State College will be eligible for an amount somewhere between \$23 million and \$40 million from the bond, enough for a single 40,000-square-foot academic building, but not much else.

The head of the Theater Department asked me for a

performing arts center. We certainly could use that here. But, if it were to be built on campus, the Massachusetts Higher Education Building Assistance program would look at it and say, "There is no way this will generate the cash flow necessary." We would have to start charging students \$300 to \$400 more in their student activity fee. That would be inappropriate. But, what if we were to build a performing arts center in the downtown..."

As he speaks, he warms to the topic and this is not unfamiliar territory for him. Dobbelle has been a college or university head at five institutions in his career, but one of the most notable was his time at Trinity College. Dobbelle is famous for using the cache of the school to spearhead a \$250-million neighborhood revitalization initiative for the area surrounding Trinity's Hartford campus. In a cooperative effort including public and private investment, the neighborhoods around the Trinity campus were transformed. That initiative, now some 10 years old, continues to resonate nationally. Just days before he sat down with the Westfield Evening News, Dobbelle was the keynote speaker on civic engagement at a conference at Arizona State.

"If we were to build it downtown, we could hire an agency to book the facility when the school is not using it. That would generate revenues. Combine a performing arts venue with the interest people have in building a hotel in the downtown, that could make Westfield pop."

Indeed, Dobbelle has been having those conversations with Westfield Mayor Michael Bowdler about just such potentials. He said he knows that an institution like Westfield State College could have a significant impact on the surrounding community, and at the same time, that enhanced community contributes to the goals of Westfield State College.

The school is already developing a residential complex in its original home, the Westfield Normal School building on Washington Street. That will bring a certain number of Westfield State College students into the downtown on a full-time basis, helping to generate what Bowdler calls, "people presence."

"This college can have a bigger impact on Westfield than Smith College has had on Northampton," Dobbelle said. "All we need are willing players. I've said it before, Westfield is our first name, and I

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