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Cabrillo candidates introduce themselves

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WATSONVILLE — Three of the five candidates for president of Cabrillo College spoke to faculty and community members Thursday in forums at the college’s Watsonville and Aptos campuses.

Each candidate gave a brief introduction and answered questions from moderator Rachel Mayo and the audience during the half-hour sessions.

The five candidates are vying for the position left open by Brian King, who was appointed as chancellor by the Los Rios Community College District Board of Trustees.

The new president will take over from interim president John Hendrickson, who has served at Cabrillo since Feb. 1.

Dr. Pamela Walker is the vice president of student services at American River College in Sacramento, a position she has held for six years.

Coincidentally, American River, which is part of the Los Rios district, held its graduation ceremony Wednesday night, with King giving his first commencement address as chancellor, Walker said.

Walker previously served as dean of physical education/athletics and dean of admissions at Cerro Coso College. She currently sits on the executive board for the Chief Student Services Officers and the California Community College Athletics Association Board.

Walker said her passion for education helps her understand that every employee, from classified staff to management, plays an important role in helping students succeed.

It also helps that she was a classified employee herself at California State University, Sacramento, when she was a graduate student, she said, doing janitorial duties.

“The president is no more important than the janitor,” she said. “I feel like the work I do is important and the work you do is important.”

From her experience serving on committees, Walker said she understands the issues from the state level and how it affects community colleges, good or bad.

“I get involved,” she said. “I want to be an advocate. You have to be involved, you have to be there and you have to be present.”

With Cabrillo College earning the recognition of being a Hispanic Serving Institution by the California Department of Education, Walker said it is important to hire faculty that reflect the demographics of students they will be serving. This is a practice she said she has done well, hiring administrators that are Hispanic at American River.

In addition, with the recent influx of Slavic students enrolling at American River, Walker said she has hired Slavic counselors.

“We have to be prepared for every population of students who come to our campuses,” she said.

Walker praised Cabrillo’s Governing Board for being “very active” and getting “very good things done,” something she said she plans to continue if chosen as president.

“We’re here for the students,” she said. “Student success is going to be our mantra.”

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Dr. Laurel Jones, president at Mission College in Santa Clara, said her 25-year career in the California community college system began when she was a teaching assistant at Mt. San Antonio College.

By doing so, “I grew to understand the importance of classified professionals,” she said. “They are really a part of what makes student success happen.”

Her long career in the system would translate well with Cabrillo, Jones said.

“I really believe I have the skill set that will be good for you,” she said. “One of the things that really resonates with me about this college is the vast array of talent you have here.”

She earned her master’s degree in English from California State University, Fullerton, and a doctorate from University of La Verne.

After years of teaching, she went into administration, being hired as dean of instruction at Mt. San Jacinto College for four years.

Jones said she stays informed with initiatives coming from the state level, and also said it is important to make Cabrillo visible with state legislators, showing what it does and who it serves.

If chosen as president, Jones said she wants to have a presence on Cabrillo’s Watsonville campus, being on location once a week and experiencing the community of South County first-hand.

“I would love to get to know the community on this end of the county,” she said.

Promoting communication and engaging in dialogue with staff and the community is also high on her list, she said, and plans to do a “listening tour” of the community and Cabrillo’s campuses.

By doing so, she will be able to discern some common issues that have been brought up and try to address them.

“It’s very important to listen to people,” she said.

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Dr. Tod Burnett, president of Saddleback College in Mission Viejo, described his journey to becoming a college president as “atypical.”

A native Californian, he was the first in his family to go to college and is the only one with a doctorate. After graduate school, Burnett pursued a career in finance and business management.

“It has really served me well as college president and other roles I’ve had,” he said. “Budgeting, accounting... all that stuff comes to me second nature.”

However, Burnett said he had to follow his passion, which is public service. For a time he was the public works commission for the city of Los Angeles, but became interested in education.

Later, while serving as vice chancellor of California Community Colleges, his mentors encouraged him to be a college president, so he applied for the position at Saddleback College, where he has been for five years.

“I was the right person for the right time for that job,” he said.

Burnett said he wants to be a part of a single-college district, which makes Cabrillo attractive.

He plans on expanding Cabrillo’s outreach with local K-12 schools, helping students and their parents become better prepared for college. By beginning early, it will help increase enrollment and graduation rates in the long run, he said.

“I believe it’s a completely untapped area,” he said.

It is also crucial to reach out to undocumented students and their families, he said, encouraging them to not drop out of high school and demystifying the college process.

Burnett said he believes community colleges are “the solution and answer” to many issues.

“I’m very passionate about our community colleges and the role they play in our societies,” he said. “I believe we’ve only just begun.”

Two of the five candidates, Farley Herzek and Dr. Marie-Eloane Burns, held forums on Wednesday.

Each candidate will meet with the Cabrillo College Board of Trustees for a final interview. The Board of Trustees is expected to make a decision on the final candidate by June and the new president and superintendent of the college will begin by the start of fall.