

College's PR director quits

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Western Piedmont Community College Public Relations Director Gil Billings has resigned amid growing controversy over the leadership of the college.

Billings said WPCC President Wilmon Droze's administration and his personal relationship with the president led to the action, which was effective Wednesday.

Billings did not give details of his dispute with the administration.

Billings, 57, a retired Air Force officer, was named coordinator for information services early in the fall.

He moved from McLean, Va., where he did public relations work, back to his hometown of Morganton to accept the position.

Droze said he had not received Billings' letter of resignation, but had talked with him by phone, where he indicated he would resign.

This resignation is part of a growing controversy at the college, where Droze's administration has been under fire from faculty members and students for the past 10 days.

The Personnel Committee of the college's board of trustees met Friday night in a short, closed session to discuss college employees. No action was taken.

The 37 members of the tenured faculty have met several times, also in closed session, to discuss concerns they have about the administration. Last week, following one such meeting, a "Statement of Concern" endorsed by the entire faculty and signed by its officers was delivered to Droze and to the trustees.

Other letters followed, and on Tuesday afternoon Droze called a meeting to face these concerns and to voice his own.

This morning, he released a copy of the message he delivered to faculty, staff and student government officers at the college.

He declined to release the statement Tuesday afternoon or Wednesday, saying it was an internal matter and that he wanted the trustees to see his statement first. They were not invited to the meeting.

Copies of the 7½-page statement are on file in the college library.

"I have asked you to meet here with me in order to gain clarification of the concerns which have been expressed in the press and in letters to me and to members of the Board," Droze began, referring to the Statement of Concerns issued by the tenured faculty, a letter by the campus honor organization Phi Theta Kappa and a letter from the North Carolina Federation of Teachers.

His statement touched upon a number of points concerning the college's administration, government and communication process.

"I recognize that a college is composed of several constituent groups," Droze told the instructors, students and staff members assembled in the Patton Building.

"These groups, students, faculty, staff and trustees all have a role in the governance process. I believe that it is my responsibility to clarify direction, to analyze purpose and mission, and to elicit concurrence in effort," he said.

He read "what a president's responsibilities include" from a 1966 Carnegie Commission publication titled "Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities."

Following the definition, Droze told the college group what he wanted for the school.

"I seek for Western Piedmont an expanded curriculum — one that includes more of the fine arts, more vocational certificate, diploma and degree programs, an increase in occupational education specialties, and a greater integration of our college transfer programs with those of four-year institutions.

I want... an educational environment which encourages and facilitates learning during the day-time and the evening... a learning environment which welcomes learners of all ages," he said.

Building needs and "a working environment which attracts and holds highly qualified faculty and staff" were other objectives mentioned by Droze; and the college handbook was also discussed at length.

"I regret that some of you have been offended by my efforts to deal effectively and decisively with a problem which has been with us for several years," Droze said, referring to means of communicating policy and procedures.

"I have great hopes for Western Piedmont," he said. "I came to an institution which is highly thought of throughout North Carolina. Our reputation is still intact and we are extending educational opportunities as rapidly as our human and fiscal resources permit.

"I am proud to be president of Western Piedmont and I expect to stay," Droze said. "I am prepared to review the concerns of the faculty and students and to make changes in accord with the best interests of all the members of our collegial group.

"I know I need your help," Droze said, "so let's hammer out our differences and keep the interests of Western Piedmont firstmost and foremost."