

New college VP looking to tomorrow

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Dr. James Richardson has hardly had time to catch his breath during his first week as vice president of academic affairs at Western Piedmont Community College, but he's full of ideas for the college's future.

For the past eight years, the former classroom teacher has worked for the state Department of Community Colleges, the last six years as coordinator for institutional evaluation. During that time, he visited Western Piedmont three times on accreditation visits.

"There are two things Western Piedmont is known for," he said. "It's probably the prettiest school in the system and it's got high academic standards."

Richardson plans to keep those standards and meet new ones, as the need of the community changes. He is excited about his new job, his move to Morganton,

and being back in what he calls the "right" school.

"I was ready for a change," he said. "It's much more gratifying to be in a college atmosphere... you feel more involved in a smaller community."

At the Department of Community Colleges, Richardson said, "You're constantly called upon to put out a fire. You're always initiating things, but it's like you're a no-man in a way."

But Richardson picked up a lot of ideas in his many visits to the state's community colleges, and he's ready to try the best of them here.

"I've got the best reference," he said. "When I'm looking at a program here, I've got 57 other schools to compare with Western Piedmont."

In his Raleigh job, which began in the curriculum lab, Richardson developed means of teaching community colleges instructors how to teach a course, using references such as workshops and manuals.

"We'd take a course like welding and identify the skills needed to train a welder, then develop the competencies to do so," he said.

At Western Piedmont, Richardson plans to do the same thing, based on the community's need for a course.

"If we have 10 people who want to take a course, we'll find the instructor and give it," he said. "The important thing about community colleges is to reflect what the community's needs and interests are—and their change."

"The community college system has an open-door policy, but some people have a misconception about what the open door is about," Richardson said.

"It doesn't mean every program has an open door—it means we have a program for everyone." Richardson quoted former state board of education chairman Dallas Herring as saying, "We take people from where they are, and carry them as far as they can go."

This approach will reach more

and more North Carolinians, Richardson believes, even though enrollment is leveling off.

"The system's concern now is attracting more students," he said. "We have to be a little more aggressive in making known our services. We are designed for the non-traditional student."

The constant updating of a community college's curriculum is also a factor in attracting students, in this case to Western Piedmont.

In the next few months, Richardson will begin assessing the needs of Burke County and the programs Western Piedmont already offers.

"Right now, I'm just trying to look at everything I can get my hands on," he said. "I operate with the philosophy that if you do the proper research, decisions will be made for you."

This research will include study of a five-year plan for WPCC, a needs assessment including facilities and new programs and an institutional self-study that Richardson estimates should take 18 months.

"We're planning today for tomorrow," he said. "If you don't plan now, you won't be around very long because of the money crunch."

"We've got to understand the pulse of this community," Richardson said. "One important thing is to expand the continuing education program so every student can carry through what he starts, even if his course work is at night."

Eventually, Richardson would like to see students earning associate degrees in both the day and evening curriculum.

He is looking forward to working with WPCC President Wilmon Droze, whom he feels has the same hopes and plans for the college. "We can complement each other," he said.

In the meantime, Richardson is looking forward to meeting more people in Burke County.

The North Wilkesboro native is familiar with this area. He attended Appalachian State University on a basketball scholarship



Dr. James Richardson

and later returned to North Wilkesboro to teach. He also coached basketball at Isothermal Community College in Rutherford County and taught in Naples, Fla. and at Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, Tenn.

Richardson saw the teaching side of the classroom before and after work on his master's at East Tennessee State. He earned his doctorate at Duke University.