New SUNY Potsdam president aims to increase enrollment, diversity

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PUBLISHED: SATURDAY, AUGUST 30, 2014 AT 12:30 AM

POTSDAM — Kristin G. Esterberg is no stranger to diversity. On the contrary, for her it is a mantra. And as she assumes her role as SUNY Potsdam’s new president, she intends to nurture it, preparing students for a working world that grows more diverse each year.

Ms. Esterberg, 53, a Massachusetts native, comes to the north country with her partner, Sue, a native of Glens Falls, and her daughters, Katie and Qiong Qiong.

She previously served as provost and academic vice president for Salem State University in Salem, Mass., and has spent 26 years in higher education, more than 10 of which were in administration. As provost, she worked on diversity issues and attracting international students, efforts she hopes to continue at SUNY Potsdam.

According to Ms. Esterberg, college should prepare students for an increasingly diverse world of work, one that no longer is limited by physical boundaries.

“When they leave here, they’ll be working in diverse environments. If we think about our economy, it’s not just a regional economy or a national economy; it’s a global economy,” she said. “We need to make sure that our students are comfortable in a global economy.”

Indeed, diversity is proving to be a theme this year for the college’s freshman class, which is expected to be one of the most varied in SUNY Potsdam’s history, hailing from 16 states and six

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countries. Nearly 30 percent of the class members reported they are students of color, according to Alexandra M. Jacobs Wilke, media relations manager.

Along with diversity, Ms. Esterberg intends to focus on increasing enrollment across the board in Potsdam’s degree programs.

“The goal is to make sure that we’re trying to grow slightly in terms of our numbers, at both the graduate and undergraduate levels, making sure that we’re providing the right mix of programs,” she said.

Included in that mix are a new master’s program in community health and a new program in exercise science, which has been approved at the campus level and awaits approval by SUNY.

As always, the college will emphasize its education programs, something that Ms. Esterberg said will be a challenge. Nationwide, programs have faced declining enrollment as students shy away from becoming teachers when facing more challenging programs because of Common Core, she said.

“There’s been a lot a volatility in graduate programs in education,” she said. “This is not just a New York state phenomenon; it’s really across the United States.”

Impressed by the cultural resources in the north country, Ms. Esterberg called Potsdam and St. Lawrence County a great place for study and cultural exposure.

“You’ve got these vibrant music programs, You’ve got theater, you’ve got dance, you’ve got all of this really extraordinary creative activity in this small-town setting,” she said. “It’s an incredible community. … People here are passionate about each other and about our students.”
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