

Taking the Helm



With a lengthy pedigree in adult learning, a reputation for inclusive decision making and a bit of experience with cold winters, Goddard's new president has hit the ground running.

BY KELLY COLLAR

When Dr. Barbara Vacarr stepped into the President's Office on July 1, officially becoming Goddard's 10th president, you might say she'd come full circle. Though she spent the better part of the past 20 years as a faculty member and program developer for adult students at Lesley University in Cambridge, Mass., she started out at the ground level: as an adult student herself.

"I was so much like the adults who come to Goddard," she says. "By the time I had come as an adult to complete my undergraduate degree, I had already attended three colleges."

But life intervened, as it so often does, and it wasn't until she was a young mother with two school-age children that she decided to go back and finish a bachelor's degree that she'd been just 12 credits shy of completing the first time around. Then, with her bachelor's in hand and a husband willing to "rearrange his life" for her academic pursuits, she moved right into a master's and later a doctoral program.

She notes that Goddard was always "the ghost in the works" of her education, the pioneer that made it possible for a student to earn a degree while living a life already in progress. I sat down with President Vacarr in September to learn more about her vision for the college. Here are a few of the thoughts she shared about Goddard – past, present and future.

CLOCKWORKS: Have you had a chance to explore the campus since you started?

BARBARA VACARR: It's really important to be out on the campus, talking to students and staff and faculty members, and to also be out in the community. I feel like my job is to know what lives at Goddard, in every part of Goddard: the social geography, the physical layout of the campus, where people are. So I've been out and about.

CW: How are you adjusting to life in Vermont?

BV: Interestingly, people think that I've moved from an urban environment to a rural environment. I lived in central Massachusetts on 45 acres of woodland, and my husband and I stewarded the forest. We've just moved to Montpelier, and this campus feels very much like my home environment, so I'm comfortable here.

CW: You've been familiar with Goddard's style of education for many years. How do you see the college developing?

BV: This is probably the central piece of how I think about my tenure as a president. I believe that Goddard right now is needed in the world of higher education. The conversations that are happening nationally are not about thinking and learning and human development. They really are reductionist conversations about assessment ... and not about, how do we engage people in learning experiences where they can, while they're engaged in those learning experiences, develop the criteria by which they're going to evaluate those experiences? I think Goddard knows so much about that and needs to be leading those conversations.

There's so much happening nationally that Goddard knows about. We need to be taking a leadership position so that we can inform the conversation. I feel that there is a need to connect what happens at Goddard with the larger community – the local community and also nationally.

Goddard itself needs to get actively involved in communicating out to the community what lives here and what we're actually doing. I think that's central now. I don't believe in being global without being local. I don't believe in being national without being local.

CW: You're a practicing psychologist; how might that come into play in your work as president?

BV: The skill set – the art – that is behind who I was as a counselor, as a therapist, as a psychologist, is really so central to how I'm thinking about my job and what needs to happen here.

I know from my understanding of human development that when people are faced with the potential for very exciting growth and development, it also comes with uncertainty.

I know a lot about how you build a container in which people can risk growth and development. I think we're at this opportune moment, given the stability that we now have. Goddard knows a lot about the arts and the artistic process. That artistic expertise will help us to live in a creative place of ambiguity and growth now. I think this is an exciting moment in Goddard's evolution.

CW: I understand you're leading an effort to rewrite Goddard's mission statement. How does that differ from the college's recent identity study?

BV: I see what we're doing now as building on the identity study. The identity study defined some central tenets, in terms of a market out there and what Goddard is in terms of its focus. Our mission statement does not reflect that. In fact, if you look at our mission statement, it talks about rural Vermont – plain living, hard thinking, rural Vermont. We are an adult-learning, low-residency college now; we're not rural by the nature of who comes to us. So we have not translated the identity study into a mission.

The mission will inform a strategic planning process in that it will help us to identify, what are the central themes around which we now want to grow and expand and put our resources?



Notations

BARBARA VACARR, PH.D.
Goddard President

- Became the college's 10th president on July 1, 2010
- Over 22 years as a faculty member and administrator at Lesley University in Cambridge, Mass. Developed a range of programs, including the college's first Ph.D. program in adult learning, a B.S. in organizational leadership, a joint B.S./M.A. in clinical mental health counseling, and numerous academic specializations
- Associate professor (1995–2009) and director of Adult Learning Division (2006–2009), Lesley University
- Psychologist in private practice since 1991
- Project leader for Cambodian Youth and Missing History Project, 2000–2003
- Interviewer of Holocaust survivors for Steven Spielberg's visual history for the Shoah Foundation, 1996–2000
- Ph.D. in transpersonal psychology, Union University; M.A. in counseling psychology and B.S. in human services, Lesley College

Crisis Corps after Hurricane Katrina. He is currently in Belize helping a village become a tourist destination. His most recent writings and photographs appeared in the newspaper *Order of the World*, and a second book is with an editor. rrylander.com

Walter “Baruch” Zeichner (RUP ’80) of Northfield, Vt., announces the launch of the new Paradigms website, “visions of a viable future, music from around the world.” <http://paradigms.bz>

1990s

Barbara Alfaro (GV ’90) of Berlin, Md., received a Maryland State Arts Council Individual Artist Award in Playwriting and two Jenny McKean Moore

writing scholarships at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. She is the author of a memoir titled *Mirror Talk* and a book of poems called *Singing Magic*, both available on Amazon.com

Yolanda Brown (IBA ’95) of Dublin, Ohio, won the Ohio Art Education Association’s Middle School Art Educator Award, which will be presented at the annual OAEA conference in November.

Tonya Graham (IMA ’97) of Ashland, Ore., is the executive director of the National Center for Conservation Science and Policy, based in Ashland, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to create science-based solutions to protect and restore the life processes and ecological vitality that sustains



AWARD WINNER Jeff Walt (GV ’93) of Tacoma, Wash., had a chapbook, *Soot*, published earlier this year by Seven Kitchens Press. The book won the 2009 Keystone Chapbook Prize (check it out on p. 24). See more of Jeff’s work at jeffwalt.com.

lands, waters and communities.

Paul Lesnik (IBA ’95) of Lake Worth, Fla., was named Social Work Adjunct Faculty Member of the Year for 2010 by Florida Atlantic University, where he teaches. He also maintains a private practice and trains mental health professionals in psychodrama.

Ben Mitchell (MFAW ’98) of Putney, Vt., has published his first collection of poems, *Only the Sound Itself*, and he gave readings this fall.

Linda Terry (GV ’88, MA ’90) of Charlottesville, Va., graduated with a doctorate in human and organizational systems from Fielding Graduate University, where her research was on the ethnography of a virtual learning community. Since

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That will lead us into what I hope will be a highly engaged strategic planning process, so that we can use that process to inform, what are the structures that will really support this experiment? I see it as an experiment that we haven’t quite found the right structures for yet.

CW: Have you been to the college’s Port Townsend site?

BV: Yes, I just came back from Port Townsend and was very excited. I see Port Townsend as Goddard’s newest experiment. Goddard has seeded itself in another community and is now an engine for community development. When I went out there I met with local leaders – the mayor, the city council – and then with faculty, students and the program director and campus director.

I’m really looking at expanding Goddard West and being a presence and also a leader there. Part of what we need to do, as we need to do in Plainfield again, is to look at the needs of the local community in terms of education, in terms of jobs and careers – and how can Goddard really serve the community as an educational institution? The city was very clear to me in saying that they saw us as an economic engine.

CW: How have you been connecting with students, faculty and staff since your arrival?

BV: Right now my engagement is really up close and personal. It’s saying to people, “If you invite me, I will come.” And I have been coming. I have been meeting as much as I can with faculty and with students. I’m sitting in on faculty council. I’m at each residency arranging to have real time with the faculty, with the student council, with students. Students have been coming to my office. I had an open house where I invited the community to come to the president’s office. It’s really important to me.

People have been concerned about what my agenda is, and what I keep saying is, “My agenda right now is to learn what lives here so that I can create an agenda with you. But if you don’t join me, I’ll have to have my own agenda, so please join me.”

CW: Has anything surprised you about Goddard?

BV: I think one thing that surprised me – while I knew it intellectually, experiencing it is really different – is the level of passion and commitment that lives here. I’ve never met a college before that has the power to break people’s hearts. Or to fill people’s hearts. Goddard does. It’s a state of mind and a state of being as much as it is a state of place. ☺