

Views from the Green: I'm Sue Knapp with the Office of Public Affairs. And today I'm talking with Barry Scherr, who's Provost of Dartmouth College, who's just announced that he will be Provost a little bit longer. Welcome, Barry.

Barry P. Scherr: Thank you.

VG: So, in addition to being Provost, you're also the Mandel Family Professor of Russian.

BPS: That's correct.

VG: But it's your job as Provost that we're going to focus on today. You've agreed to stay on as Provost. For how long? Why?

BPS: I have to say that it's up to two years. And that has to do with a couple of points that Jim Kim has made, as we've talked about things over the last couple of weeks. One difficulty I got to realize, when I thought about stepping down sort of soon after the transition, as I talked about in the past, is that it's not really a good, clear point for stepping down, necessarily. That'll probably never happen. But, looking for something that's a bit better than what's taking place right at this moment.

And the reason is that, first of all: there's still more work to be done on the transition, providing some continuity here at Dartmouth, some institutional memory for the central administration. That's one part of what I would see myself doing. Another part is the reaccreditation process, which I've been leading and working with other people on, of course.

VG: Let me stop you right there. That's the accreditation with the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. That's our accrediting--

BPS: -- body, right. That's the group that does it, yes. And they deal with every institution that gives a higher degree in New England, ranging from major universities to small institutions.

VG: And that happens every couple of years?

BPS: It happens every ten years.

VG: Every ten years.

BPS: In our case, it would be 11 years. And we've delayed for a year because of the transition. We didn't want to do it the minute that a new president arrived. So it's really scheduled for November of 2010. There's a lot of work necessary for and preparing for this. We actually started talking about it, really, about a year ago, and started doing some more serious work on it over the last several months. And so, that's actually underway right now. In fact, as we're talking today, came from-- didn't come directly from, but I had a meeting earlier today with some of the folks who will be working on it.

VG: And that falls into your job as Provost?

BPS: Basically, yes, because this does involve the whole institution. It's arts and sciences, but also the professional schools, and involves a lengthy self-study that we have to do. We're setting up a whole series of subcommittees to work on them. And, in fact, the work is really going on over the summer and into the fall. But then, it'll continue, really, throughout the rest of 2009, and really throughout most of 2010.

VG: So tell me a little bit more about what it is to be a Provost at Dartmouth.

BPS: It's a lot of different things, I guess. There's no one thing.

VG: Aside from meetings.

BPS: Okay, lots of meetings that could start early in the morning and go long into the evenings some of the time. But, it's really several different sets of responsibilities. Typically, the Provost is the chief academic officer for the institution. So I work closely with Carol Folt, Dean of Arts and Sciences. The three professional schools all report to me. So I have a very close working relationship with all of those.

I chair an academic planning committee, which consists of those deans, plus associate deans, plus others involved with the academic side of the institution. I work on a budget and part of the budget committee, and really discuss with the president, with the executive vice-president, some of the larger issues around the budget, on a fairly regular basis.

And I have a set of direct reports of my own. This would include libraries, computing, Hopkins Center, Hood Museum, Dickey Center, Tucker Foundation and, really, quite a few others as well.

VG: All the centers and institutes that have to deal with academics?

BPS: Not all. It's actually interesting. Dartmouth, like a lot of schools, had various centers and institutes set up at different times and in different ways. So a number of them report to different places. But there are a number that are under me as well.

VG: So tell me a little bit about that. I know that President Kim wants to look at the job of Provost and do a study about that, which is also going to be what you're doing over the next couple of years. Tell me a little bit about that.

BPS: What we'd like to do is we'd take a closer look at what some of the other institutions have done with the Provost's position, compare it more closely to what Dartmouth does. In the case of Dartmouth, the Provost's Office has existed at least since the 1950s. But it was a much smaller operation for quite a while, then disappeared for a while-- or essentially disappeared as a separate office.

Leonard Rieser, who was Dean of Faculty, also held the title of Provost for quite some years. And it got set up again as a separate office in the early 1980s. And so, bit by bit, it's been evolving. And it turns out that we never really, I think, sat down as an institution and thought of what the Provost Office should be. So this would, I think, finally be the opportunity for us to step back a bit, take a look at it, see whether or not we're covering

all the functions that are covered at other institutions, and really just do a close look at it. During my last period in office, we'll get ready for the next person who comes in.

VG: So, speaking about your period in office, you've been Provost about eight years now.

BPS: Right.

VG: Major accomplishments?

BPS: Well, several, I guess. One of the early items that I was involved with was really setting up, or helping to set up, our teaching and learning center, the Dartmouth Center for the Advancement of Learning, DCAL. I chaired the committee that really brought it together. There had been two separate efforts that were working on that before I became Provost. And, out of that, we evolved a document that led to the creation of the Center. And Tom Luxon, as you know, is the first Director of the Center, and is really doing a wonderful job with that. So, seeing that get underway has really been quite wonderful.

A couple of other accomplishments, I would say probably less obvious to the broad public out there, for one thing, I re-established, I would say, rather than established, a process of reviewing all the major areas that report to me, and trying to do that over a period of several years. I think, for a long time, nothing had been done in that regard at all. And I think this review process is really very healthy for an institution. So, by now, we actually completed an entire round of those. And we'll be going back and doing that, starting over again, really, during this coming year.

Also in that regard, I think that committee that I mentioned just a moment ago, the academic planning committee, really brings together the key people on campus who can look more broadly at what we're doing institutionally in that regard. It's a committee that probably should have existed a long time ago. It's one I think that we're still feeling our way a little bit, to make it as effective as possible. But I think having a group like that meet on a regular basis is really extremely important for giving Dartmouth some guidance.

And, may I just mention as well, briefly, one other item, which is probably less in the area of accomplishments than survival, I suppose. But this last year, when we really had to deal with the budget reductions, it's always a very difficult process. We've done that once before during the time that I've been Provost. And I think that, having learned from our experiences the first time around, I think we did about as good a job as possible getting through a very, very difficult situation.

I wouldn't say that every decision was necessarily the very best one. But I think many of them were very well informed, very well thought out. And I think we've left Dartmouth very well positioned to build on its current foundation. So I can't say that was one of the more pleasant parts of the job. But certainly, I think it's been a very important one.

VG: Certainly, the economy is something a lot of businesses continue to struggle with. So, after you were Provost, you have expressed a desire to go back to your academic roots. You are a professor Russian language and literature.

BPS: Right.

VG: So tell me a little bit about your scholarly pursuits. What interests you in that theme?

BPS: I've had several interests over the years. I've never really concentrated on one particular topic exclusively, I guess, during any period, since I've been at Dartmouth. I would say probably three, even four major areas that I've worked on ... And I've done a little bit in all those since I've been Provost. So one -- my real first love, I guess -- has probably been Russian prose for the first third of the 20th century. It's a very exciting period, because it's the part that straddles the Bolshevik Revolution.

I've always had a great interest in politics in literature. And certainly, there's no period at all when politics and literature have been more closely entwined than just then. So that's really, I'd say, my real first love. Done a lot of work, as well, on Russian poetry. In fact, probably outside Dartmouth, I'm probably best known for some of the work that I've done there. And I've continued to write, both on some of the 20th century poets individually, and more broadly, Russian versification which, again, is an area where I've done quite a bit of work over many, many years.

And more recently, beginning, oh, about a dozen years ago, I guess, I developed an interest in Russian film as well. And I've written on that and, in fact, cohosted a conference-- this was back about ten years ago, now-- on Eisenstein's centennial, which eventually led to a collection of articles that I co-edited with Al LaValley, who was then teaching here and has since retired.

VG: So, as Provost, you can still keep your hand in your academic life?

BPS: I try. I'm not sure when I find time to write anything. But I somehow manage to do that here and there, and still try to get to a national conference or two each year, and give papers. I manage to keep things up.

VG: Good. So tell me about the last couple of months. It's been a busy time at Dartmouth, kind of an exciting time, a time of transition as we talked about. We welcomed a new president on July 1. But I know a lot of work went into the lead-up to July 1. Tell me a little bit about that.

BPS: Yes. We tried to do a couple of things during that period. Part of it was really just asking the heads of various areas, ranging from the academic areas, the deans, including various departments, administrative departments, really to prepare summaries about their areas for Jim Kim. In a lot of cases, these individuals eventually got to meet with him during the spring.

And our effort was really to try to get as much information to him as we could, but not just raw information. To the extent possible, we asked people to prepare very short documents that he could read, and then have some backup information that he could look at as well.

In addition, again, there was just a lot of one-on-one meetings. I went to see him several times. And we had long discussions about various aspects related to Dartmouth. He is a

quick study. Although, I have to say, from my vantage point, you'd walk into these meetings and think "Well he got through five or six topics fairly quickly." And it'd turn out that one or two of them would easily use up all the time we had available. I mean, again, this is still a fairly large, fairly complex place.

VG: Right.

BPS: And it takes a while to go over all the things about it that one wants to know.

VG: And President Kim was eager to learn?

BPS: He was and still is.

VG: Well, I'm glad you'll be staying on a little while longer.

BPS: Thank you.

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