

BEVERLY

## Broad new strokes for an art school New Montserrat president sculpting a renaissance



Wendy Maeda / Globe Staff

**By Steven Rosenberg, Globe Staff |  
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When Helena Sturnick took over as president of Montserrat College of Art in June, the school was staring at a \$6.2 million deficit, shrinking enrollment, and low morale among faculty and staff.

Just over three months later, Montserrat has sold two underutilized college properties on Cabot Street for \$1.5 million, raised \$1.5 million from an anonymous donor, and is launching an \$8 million project to build the college's first set of new buildings - four residence halls - in downtown Beverly.

Sturnick said the school plans to raise another \$4 million for the new residence halls, which are expected to open in 2009. The new dorms will hold 86 students and will increase the number of dorm beds at the school to 175. Currently, 278 students attend the four-year school.

Sturnick and other school officials hope the new buildings will help attract new students and boost enrollment, while serving as a gateway to the downtown campus.

"We anticipate it's going to have a recruiting outcome, and we also anticipate it's going to give us a revenue stream," said Sturnick, of the planned residence halls.

In just three months, Sturnick - who had formerly served as president of four universities, including Keene State in New Hampshire and the University of Maine at Farmington - has focused on improving the school's bottom line and already has drawn praise from faculty and the school's trustees.

"We're really headed toward very secure financial footing," said Sturnick.

With fewer than 300 students, the four-year college has had a presence in Beverly for 37 years, when the school was founded by local artists. In 1990, the school had outgrown its space at the North Shore Music Theatre, and moved to downtown Beverly, where it now owns 17 buildings. With a faculty of 46, students from New England and throughout the United States have been drawn over the years to the college's intimate classrooms and studios. Some alumni have gone on to become stars in their fields, including fashion designer and artist Sigrid Olsen, sculptor Carlos Dorrien, and 2007 Hatch Award winner Gary Greenberg.

But in recent years the school has faced increased competition from other art schools such as Massachusetts College of Art, Maine College of Art, and New Hampshire Institute of the Arts, said Laura Tonelli, the school's dean of academic affairs. This, along with increased program offerings by public and private colleges, contributed to the shrinking enrollment, said Sturnick.

Also, the school is still reeling from its decision in 2002 to boost enrollment to 400 students. Almost immediately, administrators and faculty realized the plan had failed when students began to drop out. At the time, the school was run by Stan Trecker, who resigned as president last spring. Sturnick believes the college needs to remain small to succeed.

With tuition representing more than 90 percent of the budget, morale at the school reached a nadir two years ago, when enrollment dropped to a low of 256 students. The college failed to balance its books, and ran deficits of \$106,000 and \$127,000 in 2005 and 2006. Still, the economic news was not all bad - the college was able to raise \$2.1 million from 2004-2007.

Sturnick said she was drawn to Montserrat by the challenge of fixing the school's financial problems and boosting its morale. One of her first decisions was to bring in a chief financial officer, a post that did not exist in the previous administration. She chose William McGarry, who formerly served as president of Anna Maria College near Worcester. She also hired a new comptroller, created a president's cabinet that's been filled by her top administrators, and moved her office to the school's largest administration and classroom building so she could become more visible.

"She's got experience, energy, enthusiasm, and has definitely changed the attitude on campus, and the community has taken notice," said Hilliard Ebling, chairman of the board of trustees.

Charles Boyer, who has taught English at the college for 20 years, also praised Sturnick's vision for the school, and said morale among staff has jumped since Sturnick took office.

"She is very open to listening to people and learning; she knows the ropes and she's been around," he said.

Sturnick hopes the school will grow to a maximum of 325 under her leadership, and said attracting students to the school will be critical for the school's growth.

"It's a tough time for colleges of art," she said. "There's a shrinking pool overall, of students, and in New England, there's going to be even more a decline regionally in the next 10 years because of a demographic shift. People are leaving New England." ■