

From MIT to arts school, he likes the fit

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Two months into the job, Montserrat College of Art president Stephen Immerman has noticed some changes in his life.

For one thing, his morning commute from Salem to Beverly is about an hour and 20 minutes shorter than the trek from Scituate to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge. He would commute mornings on Route 3A where, he said, "There are six Dunkin' Donuts."

On the Montserrat campus, Immerman has found the 339-student Beverly-based art college has much in common with the world-famous 10,000-student engineering school in urban Cambridge.

"The similarities are the passion, the self-directedness, the ability to focus, the extent to which you have to practice what you do to be good at it, and the creativity," said Immerman, 56. He noted that despite its size, MIT operates like a small school, and one where more space is devoted to hands-on research and enterprise than to classrooms. "They're very, very similar."

Immerman joined the college on Nov. 16 following an extensive and competitive interview process that included several forums with students, faculty, and staff.

While Immerman was looking for the right fit, Montserrat's board of trustees was looking for the same thing after interim president Helena Sturnick helped the college weather a shaky period.

"He's the piece of the puzzle we need to further strengthen the institution," said Lee Dellicker, president of Windover Development Corporation, who serves as chairman of both the board of trustees and the search committee for a new president.

When Sturnick took over in 2007 the college was mired in debt, and - in Dellicker's words - "on the verge of disappearing."

Under Sturnick's leadership, the college was able to retire much of that debt, and actually launched a capital campaign that resulted in the completion of an 80-student residential complex, the Helena J. Sturnick Student Village. This year, the number of incoming students is 139, the largest in school history, which brings the student population to 339. That's fewer than the college's high-water mark of 400 students in 2003, but a great improvement from the 269 students who attended the school in 2007-'08. In an enrollment-driven institution with a limited endowment, the low student population put a financial strain on the college.

Sturnick strengthened the board of trustees and attracted some benefactors of substantial means and influence, including Steve Dodge, Windover Development owner and a major benefactor of the school.

"She had the knack to get people to really understand what was special about the place," Dellicker said. "The new [board] members started to see that there really was something here. It has a strong faculty, great programs, and even though there were financial issues, this was a place worth saving."

Sturnick's contract stated that her tenure would be an interim one, and when the trustees went looking for a new president, they sought one who could continue her progress and provide strong management for the future.

"We loved the last president, but [Immerman's] the right guy for the right time," said Jo Broderick, dean of college relations and interim dean of advancement. "He has some really strong ideas about how to move the college forward, and he's really creative, so he's a perfect fit for us."

Immerman served in several capacities during 30 years at MIT, including fund-raising, fiscal management, construction, student life, and alumni affairs through MIT's Resource Development, Academics, and Student Affairs Divisions. He also chairs the board of directors for the State University of New York at Potsdam Foundation, where he helped lead a \$12 million fund-raising campaign for his undergraduate alma mater.

"We were looking for [someone with] a strong academic and educational background, along with an administrative background," Dellicker said, noting that Immerman has strong fiscal talents and operational skills. "He understands academics, and understands how to run a business, with those challenges."

Dellicker said the leadership will need to deal with some fairly unglamorous immediate issues, including improving its operational infrastructure such as its informational technology systems, as well addressing issues with a faculty and staff that in recent years has have worked without raises and accepted cuts to retirement packages.

The college is close to hiring a new comptroller and is seeking a dean of development. It is midway through a \$7 million capital campaign. Dellicker noted that Montserrat is also in the process of further strengthening its board of trustees.

For Immerman, there was no single moment to let him know that Montserrat is the right fit for him. But when he decided to make a change several months ago, there were a number of questions he wanted answers to. Was it a place that could use his skills? Was it a place that would welcome the change? Were the people involved supportive of each other? At his age, he didn't want to make the change without those factors in place.

"This was the place that met all of those criteria in incredible proportions," he said.

"It was almost from the first time I walked on campus, when somebody held a door open for me, and smiled. It's that kind of detail that told me, 'This is right. This is where I belong.' " ■