

Lori A. Vermeulen, Stockton's New Provost: 'Empowering Faculty' Leads to Student Success

***For Immediate Release; with Lori A. Vermeulen photo;
breakout box at end***

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Galloway, N.J. - An opportunity to do undergraduate research with a faculty member changed the life of Lori A. Vermeulen, Stockton University's new provost and vice president for academic affairs. She begins her first day at Stockton today intent on providing the resources to enable more students to have that experience.

"My goal is to empower the faculty to do their best work through high-impact practices with students," Vermeulen said. High-impact practices include research, internships and study abroad, which "can really show a student what their life could be like if they pursue that discipline," she explained. "It happened to me."

Vermeulen comes to Stockton from West Chester University of Pennsylvania (WCU), where she served as dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, the largest college at an institution that serves over 16,000 students.

In her new position, Vermeulen is responsible for providing vision, leadership and strategic planning for the institution's academic core, supervising seven schools and other offices within the Division of Academic Affairs, and for the process of recruiting, hiring, mentoring and evaluating faculty.

She made her mark at WCU by starting numerous grant programs to fund faculty-student research and community partnerships. These include outreach to schools in Kennett Square and Coatesville, Pa., where students from WCU tutor and mentor a diverse group of lower-income students, encouraging them to become the first in their families to go to college.

Another grant she initiated will help WCU establish a field station in Rwanda, where faculty and students will do research on primates in the wild, she said.

She was attracted to Stockton because its "values are consistent with my own." **-more-**

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Stockton has “a very unique General Studies program. It’s very forward thinking and progressive,” she pointed out. “General Studies incorporates interdisciplinary approaches to education and problem solving. You’re really teaching students how to look at problems from different points of view, and that more than anything, is what students need to compete in today’s world.”

Vermeulen understands that universities need to provide education that will lead to jobs as well as a broader and deeper education that values other viewpoints, utilizes critical thinking and develops resiliency.

“Even though parents and students want to say, ‘How do I get that job?’ and sometimes that’s all they think about, we need to prepare them so that not only can they get the first job, but they can get their 10th job,” she said. “Their first job may be obsolete in five years.”

“We can’t really predict what the jobs are going to be like in five years,” she continued. “That’s why a liberal arts education is so important and so valued by employers. We’d better make sure the students have good, transferable skills and are able to be resilient and adapt to change. That will serve them well, no matter what happens.”

Vermeulen’s career path is a testament to change. Married at 19 (and coming up on her 34th anniversary this fall), she and her husband Len, moved to Hawaii due to his job as a helicopter crew chief in the Marine Corps. She kept taking courses while on Oahu, and eventually finished her undergraduate degree in Chemistry back at the University of Scranton, 25 miles from her hometown of Tunkhannock, Pa.

Her first job after graduation was as a chemist in quality control at Merck’s Chemical Manufacturing Division, but eventually she wanted “to be more creative and try new things.”

She moved on to Merck, Sharpe, & Dohme Research Laboratories, where she manufactured compounds for possible use in clinical drug trials. But that also had its limitations, and “my colleagues there encouraged me to go to grad school, because they said that I was really good at research and I could only go so far with a bachelor’s degree.”

She headed to Princeton, where she earned her master’s degree and Ph.D. in Chemistry and found she enjoyed working as a teaching assistant.

That experience led her to join the faculty at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, where she did research and was a professor of chemistry for 13 years.

“And then somebody taps you on the shoulder and says: ‘It’s your turn to be the chair of the department,’ she said of the path that led her into administration. “I did it to be of service. I didn’t think I would stay in administration.”

Her “turning point” came when she attended the Higher Education Resource Services (HERS) summer program at Bryn Mawr College. The program is designed to encourage women and provide them with the tools they need to pursue positions such as president or provost at colleges and universities.

While there, she met Madeleine Adler, then president of WCU, who “was very down-to-earth and very inspiring in the way that she talked about transforming her campus from a kind of ordinary one to an extraordinary one,” Vermeulen said.

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"I went back to my campus and in the fall, somebody contacted me and said they had an opening for a dean at West Chester University and 'you should try it,'" she said. Her admiration for Adler, coupled with her family's desire to move back to Pennsylvania, inspired her to apply.

She loved being a dean, which she considers one of the best jobs in higher education. "It's close enough to the faculty that you can make a big difference to them, but you don't have all the headaches" of top university leaders, she said with a smile.

But after about four years, WCU's provost, Linda Lamwers, suggested that she start thinking about her next career phase, leading her to attend Becoming a Provost Academy (BAPA). She was aided by being dean of Arts and Sciences, which was "kind of like running a mini-university" because it encompassed many disciplines, she said. Lamwers also put her on a budget committee, "so I could start to learn how things work at the cabinet level and how Academic Affairs works with the other divisions at a university," Vermeulen said.

The road eventually led to Stockton, which besides sharing her values, "is a beautiful place," she said. "I love to be near the ocean and at the main campus in the Pinelands National Reserve." She plans to settle in Smithville, N.J., while probably keeping the Pennsylvania home where her husband's landscape and hardscape work will continue. Her son, Chris, 16, is finishing high school, while her daughter, Jess, 27, is married and daughter Paige, 18, plans to major in Chemistry at WCU in the fall.

The prospect of a new residential campus in Atlantic City is "very exciting and creates an opportunity for Stockton to engage even more in the community," she noted. "It will also enable us to be more inclusive in terms of our enrollment, finding more ways to reach out to diverse students."

As to the challenges faced by all regional universities, Vermeulen is confident in Stockton's future.

"The demographics are changing and the funding sources are changing," she said. "I wouldn't say Stockton's in survival mode, but many schools are, and trying to go after that limited number of traditional students coming from high schools is no longer the answer. Most prospective students are transfer students or they are older adult students and there's a more diverse pool of students, so you can't keep doing the things you were before."

By building both community and global partnerships, expanding its geographic locations, providing experiential learning and internships, as well as more flexible class schedules and online offerings, Stockton is broadening its reach.

"Other schools are trying to copy what Stockton is doing, but it's hard - it's complicated," Vermeulen said of the commitment to excellence in teaching and putting students first.

"Liberal arts means you're going to get a good grounding in the basics for students and that's what's needed more than anything in the world today."

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Suggested material for a breakout box:

Fun facts about Stockton's new provost:

- After taking some creative writing courses online, she is writing a novel for fun. "I like novels about ordinary people where unusual things happen, and they end up doing extraordinary things. It's about their journey." Among her favorite authors are Richard Russo and Anne Tyler.
- She's training for a marathon, having run three half-marathons. "After the first one, I barely stumbled across the finish line, but by the third one, I thought I could go on. So that's when you know it's time to challenge yourself more," she said.
- Her family's dogs are sisters, and the family named them "Betty" and "Judy," after the sisters played by Rosemary Clooney and Vera Ellen in "White Christmas." "We watch it every year as a family," she said.

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