With Few Working Years Left, Dickinson Chief Says She Wanted a Change

By Jack Stripling  |  APRIL 13, 2016

Nancy A. Roseman’s announcement this week that she would resign as president of Dickinson College bore the standard features of a politely handled parting of the ways. A news release, citing her contributions, sidestepped the fact that the president’s tenure of just three years was considerably shorter than expected and left unmentioned that the decision followed an outside review of her performance.

Appearances aside, Ms. Roseman said in an interview on Tuesday, she is leaving Dickinson because she...
realizes she may have only one career move left and she wants an opportunity to work more closely with young people. That could be another presidency, work with a foundation, or a job at a secondary school.

Ms. Roseman recognizes, however, that observers may have concluded that the decision to step down on June 30 was not entirely her own. But the departing president said she saw what the future held at the Pennsylvania college, and it was a six-to-eight-year capital campaign that would effectively cap off her professional life.

"You’re not supposed to get off the train," said Ms. Roseman, who is 57. "You’re supposed to barrel down the train tracks no matter what, but people who know me know that’s not who I am."

‘This Was My Decision’

Ms. Roseman was a historic choice for Dickinson, which had not had a female president in its 229-year history before she was selected, in 2012.

Only about a quarter of college presidents are women, and she is among an even smaller group of gay leaders in higher education. Ms. Roseman said she felt warmly welcomed at Dickinson, and she wanted to disabuse people of any notion that her sooner-than-expected departure was any reflection on how she was received there.

Ms. Roseman succeeded William G. Durden, who had a 14-year run at Dickinson. There is no standard for the length of a successful college presidency, but boards often seek seven to 10 years of service.

Before her appointment at Dickinson, Ms. Roseman was assistant to the president for special projects at Williams College and director of the Williams-Exeter Programme at the University of Oxford. She had previously served as dean
Ms. Roseman’s decision to step down came shortly after she underwent a "360" evaluation, inviting questions about whether she or the board found something amiss in the feedback others provided about her. Ms. Roseman said she saw nothing surprising in the review, and asserted that the process had not influenced her decision to leave.

"I want to say really clearly that my relationship with the board and the board chair is so good," she said. "There is simply nothing adversarial in any of this. We’re all sad."

"This was my decision," she continued.

Ms. Roseman has a contract with the college, but she declined to say when it was set to expire.

Jennifer W. Reynolds, chairwoman of Dickinson’s Board of Trustees, did not respond to interview requests made through the college or a message on LinkedIn.

**Doing a ‘360’**

So-called 360 evaluations, which are based on interviews with a broad cross section of people who have observed a chief executive's work, are common in the corporate world but still relatively rare in higher education. Consultants who conduct such reviews say they are most effective as personal professional-development tools, and should not be tied to personnel decisions.

Ms. Roseman said her email inbox had been flooded with praise from professors and students reflecting on her accomplishments. She said she was particularly proud of Dickinson’s retention strategies, which include linking freshmen with assigned mentors.
The college’s first-to-second-year retention rate is 90 percent, federal data show.

Dickinson will end this fiscal year with $6 million in reserves, Ms. Roseman said, compared with a $2.5-million reserve deficit when she arrived. During her tenure, she added, the college has seen improved health-care benefits, increased retirement contributions, and an expansion of tuition benefits for all employees.

Professors at Dickinson may be heaping praise on Ms. Roseman by email, but a number of them have been tight-lipped when contacted by *The Chronicle*. Anthony Pires, chairman of the college’s Faculty Personnel Committee, said on Monday that he did not feel comfortable characterizing the faculty’s feelings about her leadership and he would not offer up his personal assessment, either.

Several other professors either did not respond to interview requests or declined to talk.

"It is what it is," one faculty member said, before politely ending a brief phone call.

By and large, Ms. Roseman said, she had good relationships with professors.

"Like any leader, you have disagreements with faculty," she said. "Someone said to me years ago that if some people aren’t mad at you, you’re not doing your job."

**Dispute Over Fund Raising**

In February the president appeared before the faculty to discuss the college’s fund raising, acknowledging that the totals were not increasing at the rate she would have liked. During an exchange with the president, James M. Hoefler, a political-science professor, offered a far more stark assessment, describing the state of fund raising as in "crisis," *The Dickinsonian*, the college’s student newspaper, reported.
Ms. Roseman said that "I simply disagree" with the professor's characterization, and she expressed optimism about the college’s fund-raising prospects. There are some challenges, however. The position of vice president for advancement has been vacant since October, and the search for a replacement will be put off until a permanent successor for Ms. Roseman is named, she said.

Neil B. Weissman, Dickinson’s provost and dean of the college, will serve as interim president after Ms. Roseman steps down, and the board expects to conduct a national search for a new leader. Ms. Roseman described Mr. Weissman as a capable fund raiser, and she said that three vice presidents had been doing a "fantastic job" in sharing the duties of the former advancement chief.

"The machine is really poised to do some great work," Ms. Roseman said. "We have an incredibly passionate alumni body. When I’m on the road, people are so happy to see me. They are so excited to talk about Dickinson. We’re poised to really make some good progress on fund raising."

College presidents often return to faculty appointments after they step down, but Ms. Roseman, who is a tenured biologist at Dickinson, said she does not plan to stay at the college. She said she is not sure what may come next, but she is looking for something to "make my heart sing."

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