

February 14, 2010

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Haverford's New Dean, Martha Denney

By Andrew Thompson

On occasion of Dr. Martha Denney being selected as Haverford's new Dean of the College, The Bi-College News interviewed Denney via email, to hear her opinions and her reactions to her new job first-hand.

How did you find out you had been selected? What was your reaction?

I found out that I had been chosen as Dean when Steve Emerson came to Washington on Monday, March 16; we had lunch and he offered me the position. I was and am thrilled; this is a dream come true for me! I am very excited about what I might be able to contribute to Haverford, which strikes me as a community that is asking the right questions, and truly committed to finding answers collectively.

Is there any part of your new job at Haverford that you are most looking forward to?

I am most looking forward to working with Haverford students, faculty and staff colleagues, whose enthusiasm and energy was so evident to me during my visit to campus. I like the fact that this position bridges the usual gap between academic and student affairs, so there is an opportunity to address issues in a more holistic way than one typically finds in higher education, even at the smallest institutions.

Is there a part of your job at Georgetown that you will miss the most?

I will miss my colleagues and students at Georgetown as I have become close to many of them during my short time here and admire them for their devotion to this institution, which shares with Haverford an emphasis on social justice, service to the community and to the world, and the development of the whole person. When I announced my departure—a heart-breaking moment, I must say!—they were flatteringly distressed but very supportive of this new opportunity for me.

What tasks do you have to finish up in your current job before coming over to Haverford?

My work between now and the end of June will be to continue some initiatives that we have begun this year in my office, and put in place some structures and processes that will persist once I am gone, so that momentum can continue beyond the transition. I have really enjoyed being in Washington, particularly during this important year, and will look back on my time here as being exciting and challenging in ways I couldn't have imagined before coming.

How do you feel about working with student self-government, especially at a place such as Haverford where there is a large tradition of independence?

This aspect of the College is one of the things that appealed most to me when I made the decision to apply to be Dean. One of my main criticisms of higher education is that students are not encouraged enough to take primary responsibility for themselves and for each other, which leads to a culture of dependence and asymmetry, in which administrators can be seen as adversaries rather than facilitators. That Haverford takes this seriously is really a wonderful thing; not always smooth in practice I'm sure, but well worth the struggles and difficult discussions. One of the main joys in my career so far has been

observing students discover what they are capable of, individually and collectively, since that is a benefit which will far outlast the four years they spend on any one campus. An institution that fosters that process is one that deserves to be emulated, and I am very excited to be joining such a place.

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