

From OCC to Abu Dhabi in pursuit of excellence

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By Pat Murphy
staff writer

R. Stephen Nicholson, who is stepping down as chancellor of Oakland Community College, has a busy week ahead.

He will be part of OCC commencement exercises Friday at the Silverstone — his last official act as chancellor. The next day he plans to board a plane to the Middle East.

By Monday, he expects to be at his new job as vice chancellor of Higher Colleges of Technology of the United Arab Emirates, an oil-rich confederation on the Persian Gulf.

Nicholson, 64, was recruited away from his \$114,327-a-year post at OCC to administer a system of six three-year technical schools in a country striving for educational excellence.

"I'm really looking forward to it," Nicholson said last week during an interview in his Farmington Hills home. "The pursuit of excellence is fascinating."

TEACHING in a foreign country is nothing new to Nicholson. He spent the decade of the 1950s in Japan where, among other things, he taught at Tokutsu College in Tokyo.

When he returned to the U.S. to work on a doctorate at Michigan State University, Nicholson fully expected to again go abroad.

"But once I got back in the United States, I realized all the work to be done here," he said.

That was in the 1960s, when the civil rights movement was emerging, the antiwar protests accelerating and women were beginning to demand equality.

Nicholson saw community colleges on the cutting edge of those societal changes and relished being part of them. His career included stints at Lansing Community College, Daley Community College in the Chicago area and Clark County Community College in Las Vegas.

In 1977, while president of the Mt. Hood Community College District in Gresham, Ore., Nicholson applied for the presidency of OCC, but was passed over.

Eight years later, in 1985, Nicholson was hired at OCC's fourth president, replacing Robert F. Hooley whose contract was not renewed by the board of trustees. Later that year Nicholson became OCC's first chancellor when the position of president was upgraded to reflect the school's multi-campus nature.

IMMEDIATELY NICHOLSON began evaluating OCC, its faculty, policies and operating principals.

His analysis was something of a shock, recalled George A. Cartsonis, director of college communications and graphic services.

The new chancellor concluded OCC was a bureaucratic institution that had lost its impetus, said Cartsonis who has been with the school for two decades.

Among the first changes Nicholson made was expanding so-called "developmental" classes — courses designed to prepare students for college-level work by developing skills or knowledge somehow missed in their earlier years.

OCC already had an "open door" admissions policy, meaning the school would consider any applicant 18 or older, regardless of background. But some, including Nicholson, felt the school didn't offer the variety needed to maximize its contribution in area like Oakland County.

"Mr. Nicholson was fond of saying an open door isn't any good if it leads to an empty elevator shaft," said Cartsonis. Skill assessment for incoming students was expanded and the number of developmental courses more than doubled.

Another change — reflective of Oakland's increasingly global outlook — was an expansion of foreign studies at OCC.

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— George A. Cartsonis
OCC communications director

NICHOLSON INITIATED the International Studies Institute offering students the opportunity to take courses in England, Taiwan and Czechoslovakia.

As OCC was broadening its horizons, multinational corporations like Fiat, Volkswagen and GM Robotics were becoming increasingly active in southeast Michigan.

The new chancellor also brought a different perspective to OCC, according to those who watched him in action.

"Stephen Nicholson brought a very humanistic management style to OCC," said trustee Edward H. Pappas. "His predecessor (Hooley) was very much a business man, and a good one. But Nicholson brought more of the educator's perspective."

"He has a very quiet style, yet he's very tough," said Pappas. "He gets things done."

During Nicholson's tenure, the OCC budget increased from \$41.9 million in 1985-86 to \$62 million in 1989-91. Enrollment jumped from 68,273 to 74,926 in that same period, ranking OCC among the 20 largest community colleges in the country.

As impressive as those numbers may be, Nicholson said they do not reflect his foremost concern: Quality education.

"I'm a teacher," he said. "Regardless of my administrative positions or other duties, I'm still a teacher committed to teaching. Buildings, classes, enrollment and all the other criteria don't mean anything if the quality of the education is weak or ineffective."

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RANDY BORST/staff photographer

OCC Chancellor R. Stephen Nicholson and his wife of 2 1/2 years, Carol Peterson, contemplate some changes in lifestyle when they move from Farmington Hills to the Middle East.

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HUDSON'S

'I won't be wearing a veil or anything'

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

Even for someone receptive to change, the days ahead will be filled with challenge for Carol Peterson, the wife of OCC Chancellor R. Stephen Nicholson.

Although she won't be joining her husband at his new job for several months, Peterson anticipates some changes in lifestyle when she joins Nicholson and they resume their life together in the United Arab Emirates in the Persian Gulf.

"I won't be wearing a veil or anything," Peterson said. "I don't have any anxieties. But I think there will be some changes, and I'm ready."

"I'm confident in who I am, and what I can accomplish. I expect to be sensitive to the culture and I don't intend to barge in with a lot of western ideas. But I intend to be continue being Steve's partner."

Peterson and Nicholson were married in November 1987, the second marriage for both.

At the time he was the entrenched chief executive of the state's largest community college and she was owner of two businesses in the Lansing area — one is a wig and cosmetic retail business in Haslett, the other is a growing consulting company, with customers like Stratton-Cheseman Management Co. in Birmingham.

They moved from West Bloomfield into a condo complex in Farmington Hills (near I-696) to facilitate her continued business interests.

THEY CLOSED ON the newly constructed condo in September and hadn't finished moving in when Nicholson accepted the job in Abu Dhabi. Some of their belongings weren't unpacked, but simply rerouted to the Middle East.

Selling the condo and tying up the loose ends of her business are part of the reason Peterson expects to remain in the U.S., while her husband expects to be on his job Monday.

The extent to which Nicholson considers his wife to be a partner is reflected in the fact he consulted with her before taking what seemed to be a dream job. "I would have turned it down if she didn't want to go," he said.

Peterson, a graduate of the University of Minnesota, said she is happy about the way her consulting business is developing and sees global potential. "If, for some reason I can't be a businesswoman in Abu Dhabi, I fully intend to develop my consulting business on the continent," she said.

Accordingly, the name of Peterson's consulting business has been changed from "Image Matters" to "Image Matters International."