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Executive Profile

Montgomery College president talks 'exhilarating' new role

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For Jermaine F. Williams, higher education is nothing without access. Montgomery College's 11th president, who started Feb. 28, spent 19 years in the field working to solve its biggest gaps in access and equity, including at other community colleges and institutions with predominantly Black and Latino student bodies.

The Covid pandemic exposed those gaps, pumping the brakes on enrollment progress at the nation's community colleges, which enroll higher percentages of students from marginalized backgrounds. Montgomery College wasn't immune; the institution had a nearly 14% dip in fall enrollment from 2020 to 2021 — the steepest decline among local higher education institutions in that time.

For Williams, the biggest challenge will be identifying what needs the community college — the region's second-biggest and sixth-largest higher ed institution overall — has yet to meet. A first-



KAITLIN NEWMAN FOR THE WASHINGTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

Dr. Jermaine Williams, president,
Montgomery College

generation college student, he brings academic advising, student services, sociology experience and a previous presidency to the table as Montgomery College's new leader, replacing DeRionne Pollard after she left to helm Nevada State College. So far, "it's been exhilarating," he said — and plenty educational as well.

Williams started his career in higher education as an academic adviser at St. John's University in Queens, New York. He transitioned to a Philadelphia nonprofit, using his master's in sociology, and then stayed in the city to first work as an adviser at Temple University, then the Community College of Philadelphia.

He moved to Chicago to become an assistant dean, overseeing academic programs at Northeastern Illinois University, then hopped over to Boston, where he was vice president for student affairs at North Shore Community College. His last stop before his current role was president of Nassau Community College in New York, where he led the institution from 2019 through last year.

Now, he leads Montgomery College, which serves 17,285 students at its campuses in Germantown, Rockville and Takoma Park under an operating budget of \$312.6 million this fiscal year.

What's it like entering this role during the pandemic? Stepping into this community that has focused so much on making really sound decisions, and also being inclusive and compassionate with those decisions, has been extremely positive. While there's a lot going on, there is a level of trust and compassion and empathy that I've realized in my short time here that creates a stabilizing force amongst things that are changing every day.

What do you hope will be your biggest accomplishment in your first year as president? I would like to be most proud of the inclusive way in which we will come together, identify the successes of Montgomery College and how we can amplify those while simultaneously identifying and pursuing new successes, through programs, groundbreaking ideas and transformational approaches that we have not even talked about

What do you anticipate will be your biggest challenge? Identifying the unmet need. There are so many more conversations and actions that need to occur around identifying these institutional,

systemic and systematic discriminatory practices that have created a framework. We need to interrogate those and really identify how we move forward.

Talk me through your goals and vision for the college. I'm listening and learning a lot, and that is a huge, huge goal for me. That is part of identifying a vision. We have a great strategic plan right now, MC 2025, that was created just a few years ago that is really robust. We have a roadmap for a path forward. With that said, I am and will be encouraging us, and I know through my initial conversations that we're excited to take a look at what has occurred and set that up against what we are planning to do and what we're striving for with our strategic plan, with our goals, especially with what has occurred over the past two years.

What specifically does the MC 2025 strategic plan call for or change for the college in the years ahead? What's your perspective on its impact? The six goals of MC2025 are: empower students to start smart and succeed; enhance transformational teaching practices and learning environments; fuel the economy and drive economic mobility; build, engage, and strengthen community partnerships; invest in our employees; and protect affordability. All of these represent critical priorities for Montgomery College, and some of them stand out. Expand our virtual capabilities and creating a culture of anti-racism is vital — they will lead to retention and an enhanced sense of belonging. Fully implementing the Presidential Scholars Program will help with that as well, and with achievement. It will also bolster the workforce and make it more diverse. To do this, we have to protect affordability.

What specific changes will you make to push Montgomery College toward inclusivity? Providing a variety of academic offerings allows people in different life circumstances to access training and education. The Presidential Scholars Program is open to students of all backgrounds who are committed to the goal of increasing the representation of African American men in high-demand areas of the workforce. Preparing young people of diverse backgrounds early to envision themselves in career paths that are in demand also builds equity.

What's your vision for Montgomery College's financial stability, especially given enrollment challenges and pandemic

constraints? There have been several pivots in terms of responding to enrollment challenges. When I think about early college or I think about what's happening with in-demand jobs, short-term educational opportunities, I think about the support systems that have been at Montgomery College. There are so many great ideas about how we can reach more students, in terms of access and how we can help students in terms of retention and completion. I definitely see enhanced partnerships with [Montgomery County Public Schools] — also the connection points between MCPS, Montgomery College and Universities at Shady Grove.

What would those partnerships look like? The College has dozens of partnerships with nonprofits, with the public school systems, with industry trade boards, with the chambers of commerce and hospitals. In fact, Holy Cross Germantown Hospital is located on our Germantown campus. Our Pinkney Innovation Complex for Science and Technology at Montgomery College (PIC MC) is allowing us to create a hub for research, teaching and innovation, integrating academic, business and research in one place. Businesses can locate and collaborate with students and faculty, connecting our students to employers. Our cybersecurity program, for example, is growing rapidly — 63% in five years from 422 students in 2016 to 743 in 2020. We have an articulation agreement with SANS Technology Institute, STI, which offers a professional bachelor's, giving students hands-on skills employers want and including in-high-demand nine [Global Information Assurance Certifications]. Partnerships with Baltimore Cyber Range provide students with real-world experience. Computer science has grown 44% in five years, from 860 to 1,241 students. We have created a cloud computing and networking technology degree that articulates with [George Mason University], Translational Life Science Technology articulates with a UMBC/USG, bioinformatics degree, certificates in biomanufacturing and one being developed in cell and gene therapy — they all provide opportunities and pathways to good jobs with growth potential.

In your last post, the Nassau Community College Federation of Teachers had raised concerns over the school's Covid aid spending, faculty teaching remote classes on campus, and

student access to textbooks. What's your lesson or takeaway from those concerns? Leading a large institution is a complex process. Everyone's voice matters. Creating processes that are transparent and that include all perspectives is a part of my leadership style. It always has been. As a public institution, our mission is to empower people to change their lives. Leading those efforts, and involving faculty and staff, means being student-centered and attending carefully to many factors, including operations, instruction and fiscal sustainability. Most important to me is how successfully are we serving our students and meeting their needs. Those questions should drive every aspect of our work and be on everyone's mind.

How do you view the proposal of free community college? We need to, as leaders, be focused on these key points of access completion and post-completion success wrapped around this equity lens that's data-informed, ultimately leading to a family livable wage and social mobility. We are thinking about these big-time opportunities to look at gaps not only in education, but gaps in income and gaps in poverty. Accessing and making higher education more accessible in an equitable way — that's definitely key to accomplishing major societal goals.

What books have you read recently? I recently read "Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking" by Susan Cain. Believe it or not, I am an introvert. I also read "Overground Railroad" by Candacy Taylor, which is about the travel of African Americans and looking at the Green Book over the years.

What are you most passionate about outside of work? My family. I'm very family-oriented. Social justice — it's one of the reasons why I enjoy doing what we do here at Montgomery College and it's such a good fit. I love cooking. I like movies.

The basics

Jermaine F. Williams

President, Montgomery College

Age: 42

Residence: Gaithersburg

Education: Doctorate and master's degrees in educational administration from Temple University; master's degree in sociology from St. John's University in Queens, New York; bachelor's degree in anthropology and sociology from Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania; and certificates from Harvard University's Graduate School of Education

Family: Partner, Maggie; two sons, aged four and nine years; mother and four siblings

First job: Helping brother with the newspaper route

Hannah Denham

Staff Reporter

Washington Business Journal

