

Job One

A focus on student success convinced Wayne Jones Jr. to become UNH's new provost — nine months after he became the dean of CEPS

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Provost Wayne Jones Jr. was dean of UNH's College of Engineering and Physical Sciences (CEPS) for nine months before being named interim provost and vice president for academic affairs. Six months later, in November 2018, the position became permanent.

It's a job Jones says he wasn't looking for. He came to UNH in 2017 after spending 24 years at Binghamton University in New York, most recently as professor and chair of the chemistry department. He held other leadership roles there as well, including interim dean of arts and sciences and a 12-year stint as head of the school's Learning and Teaching Center, which he founded during his second year as an assistant professor. He also developed and then led the school's Go Green Institute to encourage middle

school students to pursue careers in science and engineering. And, he holds several patents that he helped develop into small companies. The takeaway here is this: 1) Jones is qualified. 2) He likes a challenge.

Both facts may be why his immediate focus for UNH is student retention. It's not that there's a problem; in fact, at 86 percent, UNH is 20 percent above the national average in first-year retention. The question Jones asks, however, is: Why isn't it 95 percent?

"We have an outstanding student body; 86 percent of them come back, and that's a really good number. But I think we can do better," he says. "In three years, I'd like to see us at 90 percent. And I think it's possible."

That's not just optimism; it's confidence based on all his years in academia coupled with the belief that student success is at the heart of UNH — a belief he shares with UNH President Jim Dean, and one that helped change his mind on the provost position following a phone conversation he had with the incoming president before Dean arrived on campus.

"What struck me in the conversation was our alignment around student success as 'job one,'" Jones says. "And it's not just the faculty's job to see that students succeed. It's the job of the secretary who sees them in the business office, of the person in HoCo who serves them breakfast. It's the job of all of us to make our students feel at home, connected and engaged with their learning."

Retention isn't the only percentage Jones wants upped; he'd like to see the number of students who do internships increase from 78 percent to 100.

"That's very doable, particularly if we leverage our alumni," Jones says. "That real-world experience that comes from an internship is so important — we used to call it soft skills, learning what it's like to behave as a professional. Internships help students get ready for jobs, and jobs make the careers they'll have in 10 years."

There's more that the new provost would like to do. He wonders, for example, why UNH isn't better known, given all the good things that go on here. Maybe, he says, it's a case of New England humble — that you don't toot your own horn. There is also the challenge of trying to do everything and being spread too thin.

"We have to be targeted," Jones says. "We don't have the resources to let a thousand flowers bloom."

But that doesn't mean he'll stop planting the seeds.

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