

LOCAL NEWS

New West Chester University president discusses the future

Planning for the future at West Chester University



West Chester University President Laurie Bernotsky gives her first Welcome Back Address. (COURTESY OF MADISON OGLE)



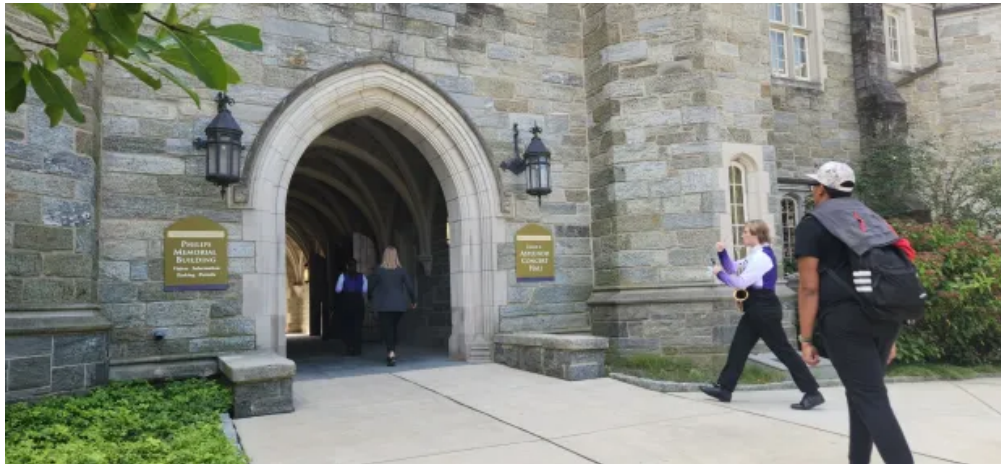
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PUBLISHED: September 21, 2024 at 5:31 AM EST

WEST CHESTER — During her first speech as the new President of West Chester University, Laurie Bernotsky expressed her love for the university and the need to listen and learn.

Bernotsky took over from Chris Fiorentino as WCU's 16th president on July 1.

On Thursday, Bernotsky gave her opening Welcome Back Address to more than 500 students, faculty, staff and stakeholders, with another 200 viewers online, from Emilie Asplundh Hall.



Students attend a Welcome Back Address from President Laurie Bernotsky. (BILL RETTEW - DAILY LOCAL NEWS)

The audience listened intently and laughed often. Bernotsky finished to a standing ovation.

“I am someone who bleeds purple and gold,” she said. “If I ever need a blood transfusion, it will need to come from some longtimer at WCU.

“I love our campus, I love our people, I love our university.”



Picturesque West Chester University. (BILL RETTEW – DAILY LOCAL NEWS)

The new president said she wants to create a shared vision through a mutual listening tour.

“It’s an approach that leans heavily on listening and learning, an approach that values collaboration and shared governance, an approach that is fairly informal, an approach that admits mistakes, and also an approach that is grounded in some non-negotiable values for moving our university forward,” she said. “A new leader will outline their vision, and often it’s expected that the vision will come with lots of bullet points, outlining lots of specific goals, that have lots of matching measurable outcomes.

“That way, everyone knows exactly what the leader intends to do. Because I never want to be that sort of leader, I can’t come to you today with some sort of predetermined vision.

“In my approach to leadership, I’m much less interested in imposing my vision upon all of you, and I’m much more interested in us all creating a shared vision together, a shared vision for our University that we can all embrace and all work to implement.”

Bernotsky will drop in on faculty, staffers, administrators, other stakeholders and students to chat, with snacks. “Who doesn’t love snacks?” she asked.

“I hope you will see my visit as something that’s inviting and not intimidating,” she said. “I hope you will see it as an inviting conversation that gives you a chance to share your thoughts, and your ideas, and your hopes for our university.”

“One of the best ways to make people feel that they have value, and that they have dignity, and that they are respected, is to simply listen to them, to really listen to them,” she said. “So, in my leadership role, I can’t promise that I’ll always agree with your ideas, or like your ideas, or adopt your ideas, but I can promise that I will do my best to listen to your ideas.”

Bernotsky wants to hear about WCU.

“I want to listen to your ideas about our university,” she said. “I want to listen to your thoughts about where we are, where we should be, and how we will get there.

“So, on my listening tour, I intend to dig deep into our university community to find the voices we often don’t hear.”

“The fact that I want to listen to your ideas doesn’t mean that I have no ideas of my own,” she added. “Any of you who know me at all know I have ideas—lots of ideas.

“And, yes, some of those ideas are tucked away in Excel sheets.”

Bernotsky talked about non-negotiable values.

“Many of you have heard me say that I want West Chester University to be a place that students fall in love with,” she said. “After all, this place is for them.

“The work we do, we do for them.”

Residence halls are packed and some students who want to live on campus can’t. A proposal to spend more than half a billion dollars on renovations of existing, and construction of a new residence hall, is in the works.

“It has become abundantly clear to me during my first weeks as president that we must, we absolutely must, find a way to overcome our student housing shortage,” she said.

Bernotsky favors ideas that make the university more affordable and accessible to students, and views ideas that move in the opposite direction far less favorably.

“That is what I want West Chester University to be for our students: an accessible opportunity that forever changes their lives,” she said. “After all, an amazing education is a meaningless education if you can’t access it.”

Another non-negotiable value: “I favor ideas that move our University to the next level, and I view ideas that move us in the opposite direction far less favorably,” she said.

“What exactly do I mean by that? I want us to think bigger.

“I want West Chester University to be thought of as an excellent school on a national level. I want us to be a national model for what universities should be, and they should be places that provide an amazing, affordable, and accessible education to their students.”

Everybody makes mistakes, even the president.

“I’m not only a leader who believes in collaboration, but I’m also a leader who recognizes that sometimes I get things wrong,” she said. “It’s best to admit in this first speech to the university community that I won’t always be right.

“But, leaders who think they’re always right make decisions that are often wrong. I am very aware of the fact that I can be wrong.

“So, I am a leader who will sometimes make mistakes, but I will always admit to those mistakes.”

Bernotsky said she has an informal style.

“Certainly, the presidency is a serious job, but I also believe that leaders become less effective when they take themselves too seriously,” she said. “I have been on this campus for 28 years, and during all of that time, you’ve all known me as ‘Laurie.’

“While I have changed jobs, the new job has not changed who I am. While my new job comes with a fancy nameplate, it doesn’t come with a new name.

“In other words, moving forward, my hope is that you all will continue to call me ‘Laurie.’

“Informality produces a level of comfort, comfort produces good conversations and good conversations produce great ideas,” she said.

As a political science professor up for tenure, Bernotsky was paired as a roommate with then-WCU President Madeline Wing Adler, during a trip, 8,000 miles away, in South Africa, during the summer of 2000.

“Madeleine suggested that I should consider moving into an administrative role at the university,” Bernotsky told the audience. “I was a teacher.

“I loved teaching. I couldn’t imagine myself in a job that took me outside the classroom.”

Adler told the future WCU president that administrators can make a big difference, too.

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