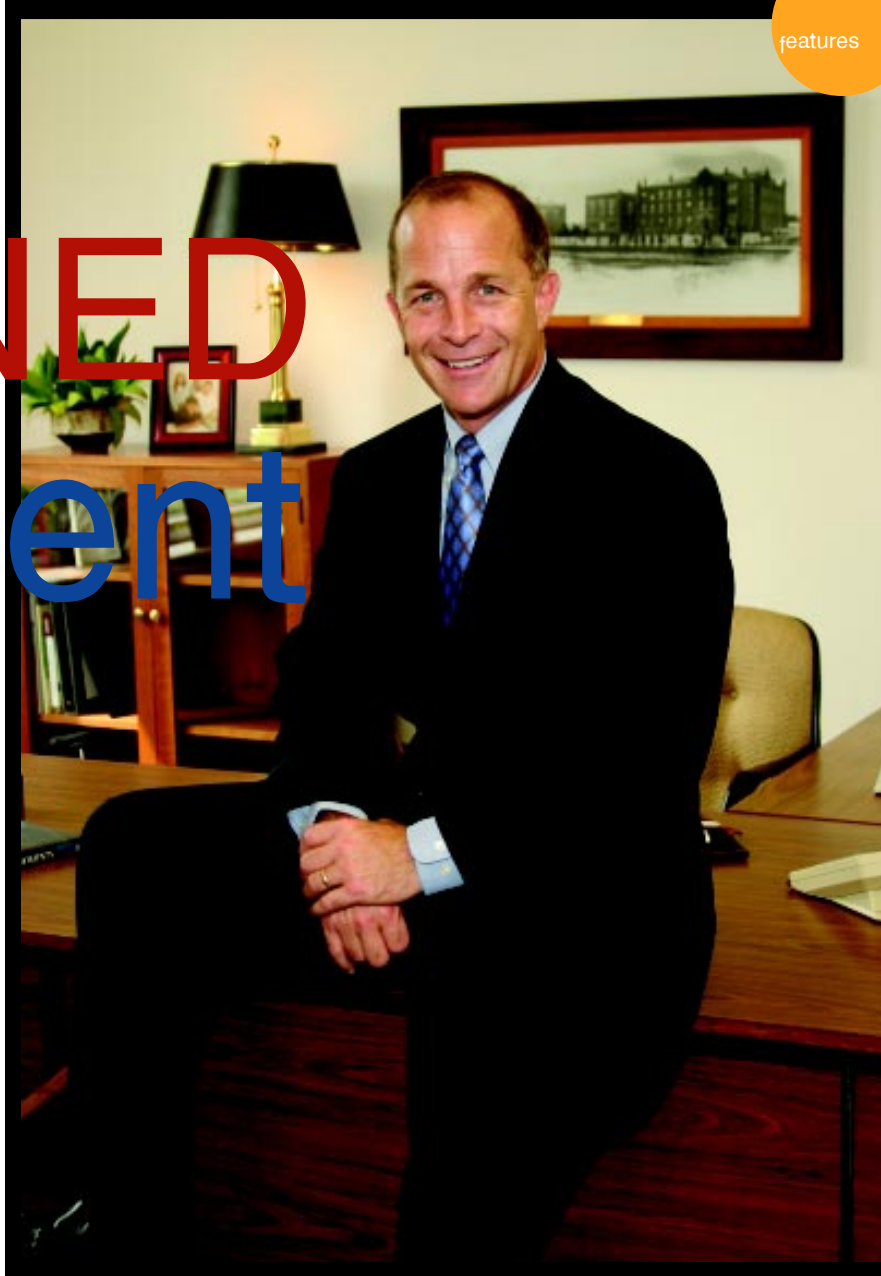


DESTINED to be president

*Dr. Jeffrey Docking's
path to
Adrian College*



by dee drummond

Jeffrey Docking is waiting outside Adrian Mayor Sam Rye's office, sipping coffee from a Tim Horton's paper cup. He is impeccably dressed: creased navy suit, starched white shirt, red tie and highly-polished shoes. A pair of modern, wire-rimmed glasses completes the look. Tan and trim, he could be any CEO starting the day. He introduces himself to the mayor and skillfully guides the necessary small talk.



Docking has lunch with a donor. He believes strongly that Adrian needs to focus on two things: raising enrollment and raising the endowment. He has the energy and ideas to do both.

"I'm getting pressure, Sam, about which civic club to join," Docking says with a boyish smile that sends laugh lines crinkling around his eyes, softening his image. Gone is the CEO. This man is personable, warm, relaxed – exuding energy and charm, yet still sincere.

There is a need to strengthen ties between the city and the College, Docking tells the mayor, suggesting innovative programs such as a coffee hour with the president, classes for senior citizens and student internships at local businesses. Comparing Adrian College to a beautiful car that doesn't have enough gas in the tank with respect to financial support, he expresses a desire to double the endowment. Along with that is the need for new ideas and energy to attract more students.

Then Adrian's new president raises his main concern. He wants to turn the former president's house into an admissions welcome center. But it will require rezoning and some neighbors have expressed concern.

"Research shows kids make their decisions in the first five minutes," he says. "We need to create a warm, cozy environment. I really do need it, Sam," he says, looking him directly in the eyes. "We need it as a college. A president looks for five or six wins in the first year. I really need this."

They part with the request unresolved. Three weeks later, Adrian's zoning board of appeals grants the College a one-

year permit to convert the home to an admissions center.

It is this kind of leadership that makes Docking effective, say those who know him best. On July 1, Jeffrey Docking, 44, took office as the 17th president of Adrian College.

"His leadership style is a consensus builder," says Rick Creehan, a former colleague at Washington & Jefferson College. "He's also an outstanding listener. Before he makes decisions, he weighs things very carefully. When Jeff weighs a decision, he asks himself: 'Is this the right thing for the people we are here to serve, the students?' If it's not in the best interests of the students, it's probably not going to happen."

Bucknell University President Brian Mitchell first met Docking at Washington & Jefferson in 1998 when he was the dean of student affairs. Mitchell was the new president. He quickly learned that Docking was a person who enjoyed developing programs and ideas and could always be depended upon to competently complete a project. Coupled with that was charisma and an intelligence that surpassed the classroom.

"He was destined to be a president," Mitchell says. "You want someone smart. Not just book smart, that's part of it. But somebody who gets it, who puts it all together. There was a certain spark, a can-do attitude and the ability to manage. I always felt he had Midwestern charisma: an honesty and integrity and a work ethic that I thought was extraordinary."

Recognizing a college president in the making, it wasn't long before Mitchell made Docking an offer: "You give me three years and I'll give you every opportunity."

Docking advanced from dean of students to vice president and special assistant to the president. Last year, he completed a prestigious fellowship at Carnegie Mellon University where he shadowed Carnegie's president for one year. Fellowship complete, Docking found himself losing sleep as he pondered his future. He knew in his heart he was ready to lead a college. But family obligations weighed heavily; he didn't think he could uproot his children and wife yet again.

Beth Docking noticed something was wrong.

"You haven't been sleeping well, have you?" she asked her husband. When he explained his dilemma, Beth was instantly supportive. "Hey, don't worry," she said. "It will all work out. It will be fine. You're losing sleep over this?"

And so the job search began. Last December, during winter

"...Midwestern charisma: an honesty and integrity and a work ethic..."

break, the couple anonymously visited Adrian College. They walked around campus, talked to some students, watched a basketball game at the Merillat. What they found was a "charming" campus that held unrecognized opportunity.

A Love of Campuses

When Jeff Docking was in second grade, his family moved to Michigan State University so his father could complete his

doctoral studies. The family of five left a three-bedroom ranch and moved into a two-bedroom apartment on campus. That experience left an indelible mark on young Jeff, who immediately felt at home with campus life.

“We had a wonderful year there,” says Bob Docking, Jeff’s father. “We met kids from every corner of the world there. It was just a really rich experience.”

The senior Dr. Docking recalls his athletic son regularly spending 25 cents to attend MSU hockey games. That first summer, Jeff first experienced dorm life when he participated in MSU’s first hockey camp, where he lived and ate among college students.

A year later, the senior Dr. Docking became deputy superintendent of the East Lansing school district. The family remained there for 16 years – deep in the heart of a thriving campus community. Jeff made daily trips on a city bus to the campus ice arena to watch Spartan hockey practice. He was ecstatic when they asked him to be the team’s stick boy.

“I got to go to road games with them and just developed sort of a love for colleges,” he recalls.

Already a Spartan at heart, Jeff enrolled in MSU after high school, turning his love of news into a telecommunications major. He worked as a residence hall advisor, already developing his leadership skills.

Years later, his father still enjoys sharing a favorite story about his son. A fellow student, severely physically handicapped, had difficulty feeding himself and would eat alone, when the other students were done. Jeff noticed that and began regularly eating with him.

“I can remember him saying that ‘as long as that kid was in the dorm, he wasn’t going to eat alone,’” the senior Dr. Docking says, choking up as he tells of his son’s kindness. “Nobody had to do it; nobody had to tell him to do it.”

A man intent on setting ego aside, Docking likely would not tell this story himself. Yet it reveals a self-described sensitivity that may not be readily apparent to others. Inside this professional man rests a genuine, caring heart that can be easily hurt. Mentors already have warned him about the difference between real friends and those who merely want to be friends with a president.

“I’m very aware of the fact that many times, people are laughing at the jokes

of the president, not the jokes of Jeff Docking,” he says candidly. “There’s a difference and I’m going to try and keep it in mind.”

When Beth Docking laughs at her husband’s jokes, he knows it’s for real. Married for 19 years, the two share a mutual admiration for each other.

“He is a very hard-working, dedicated, professional man who I really am in awe of and respect,” she says. “He’s done a wonderful job of balancing what I need, what the kids need and hopefully taking care of himself. I worry about that last [thing].”

Both grew up in East Lansing and became friends while attending separate colleges. Jeff’s roommate was dating Beth. Later, his roommate encouraged Jeff to ask her out. Several months later,

gratitude and love clearly apparent.

Friends say Beth Docking is a perfect complement to her husband and that his family is the center of his life.

“Beth is an absolute asset,” President Mitchell says. “She’s charming, graceful, warm and charismatic in her own right. She makes him look more human; his jokes are funnier.”

Path to the Presidency

After MSU, Docking spent a year working as a television reporter at WFLS-TV in Lansing where he relished covering the state capitol. Deciding he really wasn’t “that good,” he searched for the next step along life’s path. Docking turned to Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Illinois, where he

Kathy Marovelli



Jeffrey and Beth Docking have been married 19 years. People say Beth complements her husband perfectly. “She makes him look more human; his jokes are funnier.”

his friend called and inquired whether Jeff ever pursued a date.

“Ask her out?” he exclaimed. “I’m going to marry her!”

Beth was in her first year of law school when the couple left East Lansing. She planned to complete her law degree, but after holding their first child, “gave it all up for these kids and me,” Docking says. “That is a level of kindness I just can’t get my mind around,” he says, the

hoped to “sate this curiosity about why we’re here.” During that time, he served as a student pastor for one year and volunteered in area homeless shelters.

It is his Christian faith, Docking says, that forms the foundation for his life. He explored other religions but found Christ’s message of love to be most meaningful. Yet he views himself as very ecumenical and says his own religious views will never be forced on others.



Docking believes the most important work on campus does not happen in the president's office. It occurs in the classroom when students enter the process of learning with their professors.

"Love stands as the basis of what I do," he says thoughtfully. "It is the sieve through which I try to pour my life. I certainly fall short a lot. When I'm most disappointed with myself is when I look back at any given day and those actions that I took that weren't loving."

During seminary, Docking found himself drawn to the writings of Martin Luther King Jr., fascinated by the leader's views on non-violence. Yearning for more insight into MLK, Jeff moved Beth and their 10-month-old son to Boston University for doctoral studies. To pay the bills, Jeff worked as a residence hall director. His young family lived in a seventh-floor dorm apartment and ate their meals along with hundreds of college students. The Dockings remained in that campus dorm for six years, during which time Beth gave birth to two more boys.

"I have seen him plug away and accomplish his goals," Beth says. "He worked full-time, would come home and have dinner and always give baths to the boys. Then he would go and study for at least three hours."

By the time he completed his doctorate in social ethics, Docking was feeling the pressure to find a permanent job but still lacked focus. Today, he speaks jokingly of the conversation he had with himself.

"Look, you dummy, you loved campus life in second grade, you got done with MSU, tried journalism but ultimately went back into a college environment," he reasoned. "After seminary you didn't go into the pastorate; you went back into the college environment. You've absolutely loved living in the residence hall and being around these students.

"Guess what? You like this! This is good for you."

And that, Jeff says, was a life-changing realization.

"Once the decision was made [to enter college administration], I felt like I never worked another day in my life. I love Monday morning at 9 a.m. as much as Friday afternoon at 5 p.m."

A New Era for Adrian

It's a good thing Docking loves his work because his schedule doesn't suggest a 9-to-5 job any time soon. Seventeen cardboard boxes are stacked in a corner of his office but unpacking will have to wait. He's been on the job just one week and already his calendar is overflowing. Docking has set a goal to meet with every College trustee in his first 100 days. In between those appointments, he races to meetings with business and civic leaders, current and future staff. And when the day is done, there are still stacks of phone messages and emails that demand a response.

"Nothing would have made me happier than the day before I arrived we had a \$500 million bequest and all of a sudden I could just sit back and spend time getting to know students, getting to know faculty, spending a lot of time on campus," he says.

"That's not the case. I told the faculty planning committee the first week, they need to get used to the idea that their president is going to be off campus a lot. It's not necessarily what I would choose for my life but it's what Adrian needs. The needs that we have require money and the only way I'm going to get that money is to get out and talk with people."

Mid-morning, Docking grabs a muffin to refuel. It remains on his desk, uneaten, for most of the day. In ten hours, he closes his door only once – for five minutes. A stickler for punctuality, Docking still is grappling with the best way to end a meeting on time. He favors the way one politician handles it: by simply standing up and excusing himself when the time is up.

Docking says the College can grow, but only by making critical changes.

By afternoon, Docking is preparing for a critical meeting with some key staff. He paces his office, head down, mumbling to himself: "Now, how do I want to handle this?"

A few moments later, Docking sits at the head of the conference table. A stack of books is piled in the center, including the business bestseller "Good to Great." Docking has studied this book carefully, frequently highlighting relevant points. He has underlined the first sentence on the first page: "Good is the enemy of great." It is a message he hopes to spread at Adrian College.

His staff sits around him, wondering why this meeting has been called. After introductions, Docking – a lifelong athlete – launches into a sports analogy, calling those present the school’s “Superstars, our closers.”

“The school is doing OK, it’s not a crisis,” Docking tells them. “But we would be doing much better with 20 to 25 more students.”

Then Docking asks for something so unusual there is momentary silence. He wants his staff to personally call 150 exceptional applicants, outstanding students who applied to Adrian but never enrolled. The goal is 25 more new students by fall semester and he’s prepared to offer them each a \$3,000 scholarship.

“Tell them we have a new president who wants a larger class,” he coaches. Sensing their reticence, Docking leans toward the table, rests his chin on his hand, and pauses.

“Listen, I know that in higher education everybody plays nice and talks nice and uses big words,” he says. “But at the end of the day... Hope wants our kids, Albion wants our kids. I’ve got no problem doing this in a competitive manner.”

Other colleges are looking for ways to attract the most qualified students, he says, adding that Adrian needs to be equally entrepreneurial and strategic.

Docking acknowledges the College’s need for a pool, new soccer and baseball fields, an enhanced science building and larger art facilities – adding that the only obstacle is time and money.

“This is my way of saying, ‘I get it, what we need to do,’” he says. “But you’ve got to get me through the next 12 months. Then I can go to the board and make the changes. I’m asking you to help me out this year. Give me some time to go out and do what we need to do.”

Docking knows his approach is quite different from that of his predecessor, Dr. Stanley Caine. If he didn’t recognize it, there are plenty of people to remind him – particularly after that meeting. Docking views the disparity as a neutral statement of fact and has encouraged Caine to remain involved in the College.

“I told him the same thing I told others,” Docking says with a small laugh. “I said ‘I don’t think Stan Caine had any interest in bringing in Stan Caine junior and neither did the board.’ Hopefully I have a given skill set that will comple-

ment the College, just as Stan’s skill set did.”

Two weeks after Docking established the presidential scholarship, he personally reviewed the files of each interested student. Then he called them at home. Many of those contacted, Docking says, couldn’t believe a college president would call them.

“I’m absolutely determined,” he says firmly. “I love that line from Apollo 13 that ‘Failure is not an option.’ Failure is not an option with this College and failure is not an option with my life.”

thinking more like a business and less like an institution that can eat at the trough of the public. Money’s real, we do need a lot of it and I don’t have a printing press.”

Calling this a “very critical time in the history of the institution,” Docking says the College can grow, but only by making critical changes. At the same time, he’s conscious of the precarious balance between generating excitement and managing expectations.

“You can’t put the College in a financial exigency by doing everything all at



According to Docking, the survival of a college depends on its ability to get in the shoes of college kids – which means that fun is an essential part of campus life.

For Docking, Adrian’s future success depends on attracting more students and more donors. At a time when all small, private liberal arts colleges are struggling for enrollment, he is realistic about financial demands. Unlike many in higher education, he recognizes the need to manage the College as a business. And just as in business, he maintains that investments must produce a measurable return for the College.

“I do think we need a more business-approach in higher education. I don’t run from that,” he says. “We need to start

once to make people think the momentum is simply through the roof. The changes that we’re going to make will be guided by a financial plan.”

With that word of caution, Docking once again becomes Adrian College’s biggest cheerleader:

“We’re going to create a destination point that is so big, so attractive, people aren’t going to be able to say ‘No.’”

Dee Drummond is a freelance writer and half-time faculty member who teaches journalism at Adrian.