

# Course of Action



## New STCC President Embraces a Greater Role for Community Colleges

**New STCC president Ira Rubenzahl inherits a school that has drawn high praise in recent years for both its academic programs and especially its technology park and entrepreneurship center, which have been hailed as economic development engines. Rubenzahl wants to build on that momentum and forge new and stronger relationships within the community.**

**By GEORGE O'BRIEN**

Not long after becoming the fifth president of Springfield Technical Community College (STCC), Ira Rubenzahl started meeting with area business leaders, municipal officials, economic development coordinators, and a few newspaper publishers.

He wanted to pick their brains.

Rubenzahl had heard and read a good deal about STCC at his most recent post, president of Capital Community College (CCC) in Hartford, but as he got down to business in Springfield, he wanted some input on where his new school had been — and where it should be going.

What he heard back was enlightening, and also somewhat surprising.

“I thought I was going to have to tell them how important STCC was to the community and to economic development efforts in the area, and how we needed their support,” he explained. “Instead, they told *me* how important the school is.”

Rubenzahl, 60, inherits a school that has garnered national awards for its efforts in the broad realm of economic development, specifically the development of its technology park and the adjacent Andrew M. Scibelli Enterprise Center. Meanwhile, the school has continually added new academic programs, especially in computer science and health care.

The school's new president wants to build on this momentum and forge new and stronger relationships within the community, a term that takes on a number of meanings. As he charts a course for the 37-year-old school, he has a number of priorities.

At the top of his to-do list is improving enrollment. It has been somewhat flat in recent years, and Rubenzahl, who achieved a 25% increase in enrollment over his final four years at CCC, believes he can achieve similar success in Springfield. Another priority is achieving greater diversity among the school's faculty and staff. While interviewing for the presidency, Rubenzahl told several constituencies that minority hiring would be one of his first initiatives, and he has already taken steps to more aggressively recruit Hispanics and African Americans.

Still another challenge for STCC — and all public schools in the Bay State — will be rebuilding the faculty in the wake of budget cuts and early retirement packages. The school lost many full-time faculty members, said Rubenzahl, and has been allowed to replace only a fraction of them, with much of the void being filled by adjuncts.

“It's hard to build an organization with part-time people,” he explained, adding that he will be joining other community and state college presidents to lobby for resources to hire more full-time faculty.

Rubenzahl told *BusinessWest* that he assumes what he expects will be his last job in education at a time when community colleges are being hailed as prime movers in the challenging assignment to make workers, individual companies — and the nation as a whole — more competitive in an increasingly global economy. ☞



“Community colleges have always played a role in workforce development, but they are now more important than ever,” he explained. “Studies show that nearly 80% of all new jobs require some post-secondary education. In this environment, community colleges fill an enormous need.”

But this is also a time when the country's overall commitment to education is in question, he said.

“Public higher education is becoming a more difficult field,” he said, “because the consensus that was present in the '50s and '60s, the commitment that resulted in so many of these colleges being created, has weakened considerably.”

In a wide-ranging interview with *BusinessWest*, Rubenzahl talked about his goals for STCC, and also about the role of community colleges — to which he has devoted the bulk of his professional career.

### Study in Determination

Rubenzahl, who earned a bachelor's degree in mathematics at Princeton and a Ph.D. in physics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has taught both subjects at MIT and also Greenfield Community College. He says the subject matter was largely the same, but the environments couldn't have been more different.

“They're worlds apart,” he said, referring to both the schools and the students attending them. “At MIT, the students are younger and very focused on math, science, and their careers — they were intense. At Greenfield, it was intense in a different way; the students, many of them the first in their families to attend college, were struggling to balance school with a job and often a young family. The pressures were much different.”

Asked which teaching experience he enjoyed more, Rubenzahl said both were rewarding, but the community college environment was more so, in part because of the different kinds of challenges faced by students at those schools.

“I really enjoyed teaching at community colleges because of the diversity of the students in terms of age, gender, and ethnicity — it's a stimulating place in which to work,” he explained. “Also, when you're at a research university, you're more concentrated on the subject than on the students, and it's the other way in a community college.”

“I remember one graduate class I took at MIT,” he continued, “the professor came in, wrote on the blackboard for an hour and then left; it was like that for 30 or 40 classes. He had no idea who I was. The community college environment is much different, naturally, and I really enjoyed it.”

Rubenzahl ventured into management at GCC after a 17-year teaching career that also included stints at Middlesex Community College in Lowell and the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts in North Adams.

At GCC, he served as dean of Academic Affairs and, later, vice president for Academic Affairs and Student Support. Desiring to become president of a school, he applied for and then won the top job at CCC in 1996.

At Capital, Rubenzahl presided over the creation of a new, \$70 million downtown campus, located in the former G Fox building. Other accomplishments included



*Ira Rubenzahl says STCC's historic campus, comprised largely of former Springfield Armory buildings, is both blessing and a curse.*

improved enrollment; creation of both a strategic plan and a master plan for the school's facilities; initiation of distance-learning programs; establishment of new academic programs in allied health, library science, computer information systems, and precision manufacturing; and creation of a bus pass program.

He will call on many of those experiences as he helps set a course for STCC, a school similar in some ways to CCC, and one that provides a number of professional challenges.

Rubenzahl, who had lived in Western Mass. for some time, told *BusinessWest* that he wanted to return to this area and further his career in higher education. Two opportunities to do so developed with the retirement of long-time presidents Andrew Scibelli (STCC) and David Bartley at Holyoke Community College. Rubenzahl applied for both jobs and was a finalist in both searches.

He said he eventually chose STCC — he dropped out of the Holyoke search after being offered the job in Springfield — for a number of reasons. For starters, the school is a technical college and suits his background in math and science. It is also an urban campus, like Capital, and thus presents similar challenges and opportunities, and it has the technology park and enterprise center, which have put the school on the national stage and created an intriguing blend of academic and economic development programs.

“This school's reputation is technology, and that intrigued me,” he said. “Overall, there a lot of exciting things happening here — academically and at the technology park. I really wanted to be a part of it.”

### Put to the Test

Since arriving at STCC, Rubenzahl has himself been getting an education, in everything from the state of Springfield's fiscal health — “it's not as bad here as the press is making it out to be” — to the cost of fixing up the windows on the historic former Springfield Armory buildings that comprise much of the campus.

“This is a very intriguing campus,” he said, noting that its buildings are both a blessing and, in some ways, a curse. “There is a lot of history here, and these are beautiful old buildings. On the other

hand, they're very expensive to maintain, and some of them are vacant and we don't have the money to fix them up.”

Creating a facilities plan for the campus is one of the many priorities Rubenzahl has identified as he considers the present and the future at STCC. He said the school is well managed and that he has no intention of fixing things that are not broken. But there are some areas where improvement can be achieved.

Some of these concerns are being addressed already, he said, noting that the school is taking a hard look at parking and ways to make it easier for students to access the campus. To that end, the college has established more shuttles to its satellite parking facilities.

Meanwhile, steps are being taken to achieve greater diversity within the staff and faculty. Rubenzahl, who launched diversity-management programs at Capital and is committed to staff diversity, said the school will carefully track all hiring, with an eye toward achieving higher ratios of minorities.

A report issued in 2000 by the New England Assoc. of Schools and Colleges called on STCC to achieve greater diversity among its teaching staff, he said, noting that this can be accomplished by more aggressively recruiting members of racial or ethnic minority groups.

“A diverse campus is important for many reasons,” he said. “First, it creates a more stimulating work environment for everyone. It also creates more role models for students.”

Long-range planning will be another priority for the school, said Rubenzahl, adding that he will soon initiate a strategic plan that will encompass everything from the buildings and grounds to new academic programs.

But such planning is difficult at a time when the commitment to public schools and broadening educational opportunities isn't what it was in the days after World War II.

“You don't have the broad, deep support for higher education that we had 40 years ago,” said Rubenzahl. “And as a result of that, we're under much more scrutiny and we have to continually state our case. Before, there was much more faith in what we were doing; it was a given

— and now it's not.”

When asked why the commitment is waning, Rubenzahl cited several factors, everything from the aging of the Baby Boom generation to the emergence of new and different priorities, especially health care.

“Just look at the headlines every day about the crisis in prescription drugs or the reform of Medicare or the high cost of health care — it's a constant,” he said. “And that distracts people and takes away resources that could go someplace else, like higher education.”

While most of Rubenzahl's plans focus on what goes on inside the historic gates that frame the campus — made from obsolete cannons that were melted down at a local foundry — he is also focusing attention on the neighborhoods beyond the fence, and the broad community served by the college.

The neighborhood surrounding the college is among the poorest in the city, said Rubenzahl, adding that he will explore ways the school can help revitalize the area and create opportunities for those who live here.

As a public institution with finite resources, STCC will be limited in what it can do, he acknowledged, but it can partner with other civic and business groups and perhaps the private schools in the city.

“We won't be a leader in neighborhood revitalization,” he explained, “but we can certainly help other organizations with that task. It's in the city's best interests and our own best interests to play a role in what goes on outside the gate.”

As he takes on these initiatives, Rubenzahl said he will practice a management style grounded in consensus-building and inclusion.

“I want to make sure people are heard,” he explained. “I'm not going to consult people on everything, but on the important issues I try to gain a consensus and get everyone to agree on a course of action.”

“If we can't get an agreement, that won't stop me from doing things,” he continued. “But I try to get that consensus because that's much more constructive in terms of motivating people toward that goal.”

### Class Act

While at MIT, Rubenzahl studied what is known as high-energy, or particle, physics — looking at how tiny particles come together to create matter — and worked in that field for several years.

He left it to pursue a career in education, specifically at the community college level. “I thought it was very important for people to have access to higher education,” he said. “School should be for the many, not the few.”

That view defined the strong commitment to public higher education that existed decades ago, he said, and must prevail again today in a changing, highly competitive world.

For that commitment to be restored, community colleges will simply have to work harder to get their message across about the importance of secondary education, Rubenzahl told *BusinessWest*, and in the meantime meet greater responsibilities for training the nation's workforce.

“People have had their attention diverted away from public higher education,” he said, “We have to get it back.” ♦

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