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'NEW ENERGY' ON CAMPUS

Mills leader embraces academia

Former drug company attorney will be inaugurated today as president of Oakland liberal arts college

By Matt Krupnick

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OAKLAND — Alecia DeCoudreaux was a top executive with a Fortune 500 company, but she had long yearned to be a college president. So, that's what she did.

DeCoudreaux, the former top attorney for pharmaceutical giant Eli Lilly and Co., will be inaugurated Friday as Mills College's first new president in 20 years, and its first black president. The Chicago native started work at Mills on July 1.

DeCoudreaux, 56, is an outsider, arriving at Mills with no full-time teaching or college administrative experience. She has, however, served on the board of her alma mater, Wellesley College, since 2002.

The Wellesley experience has helped make the Mills presidency less daunting, she said.

"I think I know a lot about how colleges are run," she said this week at the Oakland college, which enrolls about 960 female undergraduates and 640 male and female graduate students. "I feel very prepared for this work."

Mills trustees were not put off by DeCoudreaux's dearth of academic credentials, said Kathleen Burke,



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Mills

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the board's chairwoman. Several top candidates lacked college leadership experience, she said.

"First and foremost, the search committee was looking for a strong leader," Burke said. "She really was the best candidate."

Although it is rare to find college presidents without academic experience, there is no reason they should not be successful, said Patrick Callan, president of the San Jose-based Higher Education Policy Institute.

"What seems to matter most is whether they understand academic values," he said. "And, more than ever, whether they can raise money."

DeCoudreaux apparently has prepared for the job for years. Robert Armitage, a former co-worker at Eli Lilly, said DeCoudreaux mentioned in 1999 that she one day hoped to be a college president.

"So few people go through life and get to do what she's getting to do now," said Armitage, a senior vice president with the Indianapolis-based company. He plans to attend the inauguration. "I couldn't be happier for her."

National economic problems have hit small private schools such as Mills particularly hard. Those colleges rely heavily upon tuition dollars, and many schools have been forced to offer additional discounts, scholarships and loans to help students cope with rising costs.

Enrollment at Mills has risen steadily the past five years, but DeCoudreaux and Burke said the school needed to improve its "visibility" among potential students — and donors — nationally and internationally. Both declined to elaborate on how the college planned to do that or why they were concerned.

Identity appears to be the main challenge facing Mills, at least from a faculty perspective. The college needs to develop a plan to balance its liberal arts roots with its more recent graduate-school developments, said Anna Richert, a Mills education

ALECIA DeCOUDREAU

POSITION: President of Mills College

AGE: 56

BACKGROUND: Previously vice president and general counsel for Eli Lilly and Co.'s U.S. operations. Is a member of Wellesley College's board of trustees.

EDUCATION: Bachelor of arts degree in English and political science from Wellesley College in 1976; doctor of laws degree from the Indiana University School of Law at Bloomington in 1978.

PERSONAL: Grew up in Chicago; spent childhood summers on Cape Cod, Mass. Married with no children.

QUOTE: "We have an obligation to be of service, to the extent we can be, to the community around us."

of the Women's College Coalition.

"Women remain underrepresented in key leadership positions," said Lennon, who noted that seven women's colleges have hired new presidents this year. "Graduates of women's colleges report going on to graduate degrees more than women who graduate from coed colleges."

DeCoudreaux's experience at Wellesley has prepared her well for the Mills job, Lennon said.

"She's not a newcomer to higher education," she said.

It is difficult to know how DeCoudreaux will deal with Mills' challenges. She declined to provide specific plans or goals, saying she needed more time to get to know Mills, which costs more than \$57,000 per year for an undergraduate living on campus.

She did say she would like to improve campus technology and the school's study-abroad programs but did not elaborate on how she planned to do so.

"I'd like to build upon the strong foundation we have here," she said. "I'm kind of a woman of action, and I like to put a plan in place as soon as I see a need."

College professors are notoriously suspicious of nonacademic presidents, and Mills faculty members were initially apprehensive about

professor and faculty leader.

Though the college's undergraduate programs include classic liberal arts offerings such as history and French, it also offers graduate degrees in business, public policy and pre-med.

"This is something the faculty want to keep a handle on," Richert said. "The faculty are clear that they want to maintain the liberal-arts-central mission of the college."

Mills is one of about 50 women's colleges remaining in a country that had 300 just 50 years ago.

Many women's colleges have opened their doors to men to expand their markets, mostly for economic reasons, said Linda Sax, a UCLA professor of higher education who this week was awarded a grant to study the role of women's colleges.

Women's colleges still serve an important purpose, said Susan Lennon, president

the longtime executive, said Richert, the faculty leader.

Apprehension likely would have greeted any new president at Mills. Janet Holmgren led the school for two decades before stepping down this year to return to teaching.

"I think, at the beginning, there was some worry about (DeCoudreaux's background)," Richert said. "But people feel she's got some new energy and new hope. She recognizes she's got a lot to learn, which is great to hear from a president."

Higher education overall tends to have leadership problems, said Callan, of the Higher Education Policy Institute.

"It's always a bit of a gamble," he said. "You pick the best leader, as far as I'm concerned."

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