

Retaining Learners...An Institutional Initiative

By President Ruth A. Knox, Wesleyan College

While enrollment plans must include a variety of strategies for admitting new first-year students and transfers, a solid institutional effort to retain those students is equally important. Both require significant human and financial resources, including creativity and cooperation from virtually every aspect of the campus community. A strong partnership between the leaders of academic affairs and student affairs is crucial, and both areas can use technology to accomplish the goal of helping all students persist toward completion of their degrees.

At Wesleyan, we measure the success of our first-year experience in terms of persistence and academic success.

Technology Infrastructure

The Wesleyan College technology infrastructure begins with and has an institution-wide approach. From the college portal, students complete online applications, make appointments for advising, register for courses, learn about ordering textbooks, access grades, track their curriculum progress, and participate in social and academic e-groups. Faculty post assignments, facilitate electronic discussions, and track attendance. Thus, students, faculty, and staff combine the latest technology tools with the individual attention that is so important to a small college campus—all under one electronic umbrella. Such reliance on technology for day-to-day operations demands high levels of student preparation and support. Each student is expected to have a computer, and the college appoints a Computer Resident Advisor (CRA) for each residence hall (in addition to the more traditional Resident Advisor). During the first week of each semester, the CRA administers a Computer Proficiency Survey for each new student in her hall, working with the student to ensure she is fully connected and has the ability to access and use all available technology.

Data-driven Decisions

As we all know, collecting and analyzing data are keys to understanding the students we serve, and reliable data can provide direction for new initiatives to enhance student learning outcomes and success. In 2004, for example, Wesleyan College began to analyze characteristics of our students who did not persist beyond the first year. The findings indicated, among other factors, that students who entered college with a predictive GPA of 2.5 or less were more likely to withdraw than those whose predictive GPAs exceeded that benchmark. While not entirely surprising, this

pattern continued for four years, even for students who actually achieved a higher GPA than expected. In addition, our analysis of conditionally accepted students (those who did not meet the SAT or high school GPA requirement) showed that only 50 percent met the terms of their acceptance in the first semester. With this red flag, our Enrollment Management Team, Student Progress Committee, and Student Support Team developed a plan of action to help these “at risk” students achieve success in their first year.

The Path Program

One exciting component of our plan was the idea of a “pre-entrance” experience. Rather than providing remedial courses, we wanted to give these students a simulated week of real college experience, challenging them to anticipate problems that could arise during the year and develop basic skills to handle them. Using the name PATH: Pioneering Approaches to THinking, we invited conditionally accepted students and those with predictive GPAs of less than 2.5 as the first participants.

PATH, a one-week course offered immediately prior to the fall semester, aims to model the college experience in a condensed period, helping students develop academic success skills, discover and understand how to use a variety of resources (including campus technology), and increase self-confidence both intellectually and socially. The course includes interactive sessions in which students learn and/or enhance academic and social skills, practice those skills in a supportive environment, and reflect on their experiences.

Feedback and evaluations from students have been overwhelmingly positive. Assessment of the program is ongoing and includes monthly meetings with the PATH students, at their request, to evaluate their ongoing needs and monitor their academic and social progress. We anticipate that these students will be more successful academically than predictive scores would indicate, leading to higher retention levels for the PATH students than for others who fall in the “high risk” categories but did not join the program.

Strong First-Year Experience

Higher education experts tout the importance of a comprehensive and collaborative first-year experience as part of an institution’s overall retention plans (Goodman and Pascarella, 2006; Hunter, 2006; Evenbeck and Hamilton, 2006). At Wesleyan, we measure the success of our first-year experience in terms of persistence and academic success. Important elements of our program include interdisciplinary seminars taught by faculty who serve as first-year advisors, lab sessions that focus on skills for academic success taught by Student Affairs staff, an Academic Center, the Writing Center, a library orientation, tutoring, a fall retreat, and careful attention to class attendance and grades. Students encounter campus technology throughout this process, with assignments tailored to help them develop confidence in their ability to use technology and

transfer those skills to other course requirements. We know, however, that students can become overwhelmed by the avalanche of information that comes their way in the first year of college. For that reason, we recently developed an interactive electronic orientation module, giving students ready access to questions and answers about many of the campus resources they encounter—however briefly—during their first year. While still new, the module is receiving good reports.

Student Support Team

The Student Support Team (SST), comprised of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs faculty and staff, meets weekly to monitor class attendance and grades. Faculty are required to report after the first four weeks of each semester and again at midterm any student whose grades are below average, providing an early warning to the student and information to the SST that is critical to student success (Kuh 2007). The SST pays special attention to first-year students, new transfer students, and students on academic probation, but team members monitor attendance and grades for all students.

Career Development and the Career Map

Another aspect of our retention analysis showed that many students who were leaving Wesleyan after the first year had not yet declared a major or otherwise indicated their academic interest. This evidence led us to develop a number of new initiatives in the area of Career Development, including the Career Map. Designed to help each student navigate most aspects of the college experience, the Career Map begins with easing the transition to a new community and also encourages early planning to reach goals throughout the college years.

Effective use of the Career Map requires a student to think about and make decisions that will help her achieve specific outcomes — academically, personally, and professionally — that she sets for herself. The Map contains general guides for fostering learning, personal growth, and professional development as well as specific content areas that the student plans to study during the first year and beyond. Introduced at New Student Orientation, the Career Map is emphasized throughout the First Year Experience, especially by members of the Student Affairs staff during their lab sessions.

The use of technology is an integral part of developing career plans, beginning during a student's first year. The online assessment tool that profiles possible career directions and alternatives is introduced and used. During the second semester of the first year, faculty and staff advisors emphasize career exploration through review and discussion of available majors at Wesleyan. Ideas and timelines for making decisions become part of the Career Map. By the end of the first year, following the Career Map should lead each student to declare her major academic interest. This early engagement in developing a four-year plan also makes persistence at the college more likely.

Co-curricular Transcript

Wesleyan follows the belief that college students learn best by being involved (Astin 1993). Documenting involvement in the classroom through an academic transcript is standard practice. Since learning also occurs outside the classroom, and that process is not so easily recorded or tracked, we have developed an electronic co-curricular transcript.

With a focus on graduate school and career preparation, first-year students use the co-curricular transcript to document their involvement and make better and more informed decisions about how they would like to participate in the life of the campus. Additionally, active use of the co-curricular transcript allows a student to look more easily at the breadth of her involvement. Whatever she sees will enable her to make the right choice. Whether she narrows her focus, if she has become overly committed, or expands her activities to include an internship, sports, or community service, creating this online co-curricular transcript helps her enjoy a more complete experience outside the classroom.

At Wesleyan, the electronic co-curricular transcript allows each student to create a permanent record of her entire college experience as it occurs, becoming fully prepared to design a complete resume for that first job or graduate school application. By combining the academic and co-curricular transcripts, she can readily show all the ways she has learned both in and out of the classroom. Thoughtful attention to these activities also results in better choices and an increased likelihood of satisfaction and success.

Retaining learners requires a variety of carefully designed plans based on knowledge about the students we serve. Collaboration among faculty and student affairs professionals is essential. Even on a small campus, where individual attention and person-to-person connections are both promised and real, technology improves our programs, strengthens our lines of communication, and enhances our management and analysis of data. Creative ideas that engage students in setting the course for their college experience, including the resourceful use of technology, lead to superior learning and teaching, involved and happy students, and graduates who are well prepared to achieve their goals.

About the Author



Ruth Austin Knox
President, Wesleyan College

Ruth Austin Knox is president of Wesleyan College, in Macon, Georgia. She is the first alumna to hold that position, having graduated magna cum laude from Wesleyan in 1975 with a degree in English. She also graduated magna cum laude from The University of Georgia School of Law in 1978, where she was selected to Phi Beta Kappa and the Georgia Law Review. She built her legal career in Atlanta, specializing first in commercial real estate and public finance transactions and later in estate planning. Throughout her years of practicing law, President Knox was an active volunteer for Wesleyan, serving as president of the college's Alumnae Association and as chair of the Board of Trustees before assuming her current position in 2003.

President Knox's tenure as president has been characterized by the development of several new programs, including centers of excellence in the sciences, arts, and education, and by a renewed commitment to service and faith initiatives throughout the campus. The college's fundraising efforts have resulted in significant additions to its endowment for scholarships, salaries, programs, and campus improvements. In 2007, Wesleyan celebrated the opening of a state-of-the-art science facility, the institution's first new academic building in more than 40 years, which also is endowed for future maintenance.

In addition to her life-long engagement with Wesleyan and the education of women, President Knox has been and remains involved in a wide variety of civic and volunteer organizations. She currently chairs the board of Girl Scouts of Historic Georgia. Other board service includes Central Georgia Health Systems, the Tubman African American Museum, Georgia Women of Achievement, the Higher Education Foundation of the United Methodist Church, and the Georgia Humanities Council. She is consistently recognized for outstanding leadership and has been named to Georgia Trend's "100 Most Influential Georgians" list.

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