

Provost Evan Duff Talks about Past 8 Years, Plans for Future

During the past eight years Dr. Evan Duff has overseen the expansion of the college's adult-degree program and, as Wesleyan's Provost, helped guide the traditional-day program in a time of growth.



Evan Duff

He first came to Wesleyan in February 2011 to take charge of the college's adult degree program, now known as ASPIRE. Then, in summer 2012, he was asked to take on the additional responsibilities of interim provost, a post he held for a year. In May 2016, following the departure of Dr. Michael Brown, Dr. Duff was once again named interim provost and a year later he assumed the position on a permanent basis. He retains two titles: Provost and Sr. Vice President of Academic Affairs as well as Vice President of Adult & Professional Studies.

Last month The Decree interviewed Dr. Duff about his time at Wesleyan and the outlook for the future.

Q. You just completed eight years at NCWC, first serving as director of adult studies, and then as interim provost and now provost. What's been the most significant challenge during your time at the college?

A. Trying to find balance between innovation and historical pedagogical practices as applied to student-learning outcomes.

Q. What's been most surprising during your tenure?

A. Our campus and students services have transformed quite a bit over the last eight years. We have new residence halls and housing options, a renovated cafeteria, WOW café, Starbucks, a renovated bookstore, updated technology and furniture in many of our classrooms, new biology and exercise science labs, a more beautiful campus, and 24/7 tech and tutoring support. I'm sure I could list 10 more things. This campus and the Wesleyan community have changed so much over the last eight years and it's a better place because of the dedication of our donors, faculty, staff, administration and trustees.

Q. What's been most gratifying?

A. Experiencing the true community atmosphere that Wesleyan has to offer. Our faculty, staff and coaches are caring and go above and beyond to assist students on their educational journey. We become advisors, mentors, life coaches, older sisters and brothers and temporary parents to our students and help them in ways that go beyond the classroom, playing fields/courts.

Q. Many readers may not know that you still teach and oversee ASPIRE. Describe your current teaching activities.

A. I've worked in administration at the community college and four-year college level since 2002 and in every position. I've taught on a part-time basis. I now teach some of our leadership classes online, and the majority of my students are in the adult-studies program. However, at times, I do have traditional students in my classes. As an administrator, I feel it's important to stay connected to students

through instruction; this allows me to be a stronger advocate for the needs of our faculty who do this on a full-time basis.

Q. Let's turn to ASPIRE. As the college has reported, enrollment has decreased program-wide, due in part to the low national unemployment rate and strong economy. What have ASPIRE administrators done to cut costs and grow back enrollment?

A. Since we started to see this trend in late 2016/early 2017, we've cut many of our budget lines to help offset this reduction in the number of students we serve. While we're starting to see some positive growth in adult studies, I expect we'll continue to see similar enrollment in 2019 compared to 2018.

Q. Describe the primary competition faced by ASPIRE. Is it on-line universities such as the University of Phoenix and Liberty or more local programs? What are the market leaders doing well?

A. Most competition is coming from online programs offered at Liberty University or Western Governors' University rather than traditional face-to-face programs at William Peace and Barton. One competitor is moving its entire operations online, after offering some evening classes. I think this is a mistake, which may benefit us. I've always felt that a mix of delivery modes works best for working adults. Our approach is to offer seated, online, and hybrid classes; this helps us to stand out. I do feel we need a couple of degrees that can be offered 100 percent online to serve students whose work schedules are too unpredictable for seated classes as well as students who don't live in Eastern North Carolina.

Western Governors' University is unique in that it offers a competency-based model and a flat tuition rate that covers all course materials. You pay one rate that covers you for six months and you can complete as many courses as you want during that time, based on your competency assessment for each course. It's an innovative model, but it's only for students with the right mix of determination, self-learning skills, and motivation.

Q. Explain the financial relationship between ASPIRE and the traditional-day program. Has lower enrollment meant that ASPIRE is running a deficit?

A. Adult studies tuition has always flowed into the overall budget of the college. Positive or negative cash flow relates to the traditional program because the operating budget of the college combines the two sources of revenue along with grants and fundraising for advancement. All four revenue sources impact the entire college. Despite the declining enrollment, ASPIRE has not been running a deficit. Its net revenue amounts to \$4 to \$5 million per year.

Q. What's your prognosis for ASPIRE enrollment and its overall health over the next three-five years?

A. We're making tweaks in mode of delivery, new programs, and new locations that will help grow the adult studies program. It's hard to predict the true rebound of the adult program because there are so many variables. (i.e. innovative learning models, the rise or fall of competition, improvement or decline in economy, etc.) I'm hopeful that faculty, staff and administration will work as a team to establish goals and priorities for the adult program that will help us to improve innovation and services to adult students.

Q. ASPIRE offers many online courses. Do you foresee incorporating more online courses in the traditional-program curriculum? If so, which disciplines seem appropriate for online format? What percentage of traditional-day courses is offered online at the present time?

A. Of all the courses we offer in adult studies, at all locations, less than 20 percent are offered online. We do offer a healthy selection of courses each term, though, to give adult students flexible options with their schedule.

For many reasons, I think it would be a good idea to offer a limited number of 15- or 16-week online courses that would be available to traditional students. Many students come to college already familiar with the experience of taking online courses. Offering some online and hybrid classes provides traditional students with a mix of learning models to prepare them for their future. Although online education has been around for more than 20 years, we're exposing students to new ways of learning, which helps them prepare to learn, regardless of the learning model.

Q. To follow up, is it your sense that traditional-day students would like more classes on line? What determines whether the college offers a traditional-day course online or face-to-face?

A. I have no formal data, but I think it'd be good for us to survey our students or conduct a pilot of online classes to see how students respond. Colleges should determine their own ability to offer alternative formats based on the needs of their students. It's important to us because our mission is to prepare students to be lifelong learners.

Q. Recent enrollment growth has caused logistical issues on campus. Describe some of the challenges that the academic side has confronted. What are some steps that have been taken to accommodate the increased enrollment? What are the most acute problems and needs?

A. While we have needed to be more strategic, I don't feel our growth has caused "emergencies" when it comes to classroom space (at least not yet). Based on generous donations and internal funds, we've added a new biology lab and expanded our exercise science lab to meet the growing number of majors in those areas. We've also utilized areas on campus that we didn't use much in the past. Those areas include the BB&T room, the media room in the Gateway Technology Center (GTC) and another classroom in the GTC. We've also looked at offering more afternoon classes, making sure we use all of our 8 a.m. time slots, and experimenting with evening classes for the traditional program.

Q. The new business school building, planned for construction on the east side of campus near the GTC, will help provide needed classroom space. What's the status of the new building?

A. We have about three-fourths of the funding for this building and we'd like to attain the remaining amount through donations so that the college doesn't have to take out additional loans to complete the project. I'd expect that building to be ready by fall 2020.

Q. If you can, project additional new facilities that the college will need as it reaches 1,500 students in the day program and then the ultimate goal of 2,000?

A. I suspect we would need two additional classroom/office facilities, one of which would include the new School of Business building. Some of the new space would include the potential for expanding our exercise science labs/classrooms as well as our science facilities. These are growing programs on our campus. We'd also need additional residence halls and other expansions for dining and study space to serve our student needs.

Q. Review the new majors that the college had added in the last four years. What others is the college considering in the short and long term?

A. During my tenure as provost and as a cabinet-level adviser to the administration, Wesleyan has added the following majors: Liberal Studies, Communication, Marketing, Biomedical Science, General Science, Health Promotion, Logistics & Supply-Chain Management, Organizational Leadership, and a graduate program in Criminal Justice. Some new minors and concentrations include: American Studies, International Studies, Learning Theory & Practice, Music Production, Healthcare Administration, Hispanic Studies, Leadership and Sports Administration.

For the most part new majors were developed to serve the needs of our students, based on feedback we received when interviewing potential students, surveying local organizations, and using a cross section of employees that did research to suggest new majors. In some ways we're catching up with what our competitors were already offering. I suspect we'll continue to use these methods to identify future majors that align with our mission. I do feel like we need to determine and focus on our niche in the market, as we hold discussions about future programming.

Q. What do you say to faculty and other members of the NCWC community who believe the college has stressed pre-professional majors to the detriment of more traditional programs, moving the college from its liberal-arts roots?

A. I would strongly disagree with this statement. In my opinion, the college has done a great job of supporting both professional and liberal-arts majors through new program development and investments in current programming. If you review the new programming, almost 50 percent of new programs have been liberal arts majors. Also, when reviewing money (grants, donors, internal) used for program investments, 50 percent or more has been used to hire faculty in the humanities and sciences.

Q. Provide an update on NCWC graduate programs. What's been the early response to the masters in criminal justice, now in its first-year as a 100-percent online program?

A. Our first cohort included 15 students and nine will be graduating on May 4th. We

have close to 40 students taking classes in the MSCJ program and our growth is primarily due to word of mouth from current students. This program is providing a vital service to students in North Carolina who have rotating schedules and need to complete their graduate degree online. We're serving our mission of helping students to be lifelong learners.

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Will Plyler

SGA President Plyler To Run Again, with More Goals in Mind

Will Plyler plans to seek reelection to a second term as SGA President in the hopes of fulfilling more of his objectives.

The Rocky Mount resident was elected president last spring in a narrow win over Ariel Wilson. In earlier balloting the two candidates tied with 70 votes apiece, prompting a re-vote.

Born in Lenoir, a small town located near Boone, Plyler is a communication major with minors in religious studies and music production. On campus he's involved with Fellowship of Christian Athletes and the music group Spectrum; he sings and plays piano and electric guitar. Besides writing and performing music, he enjoys playing on Wesleyan's disc golf course.

He was interviewed by The Decree in February.

Q. How do you like serving as SGA president?

A. It's a joy and a privilege to serve as the president. Though the position is a lot of hard work, it's also super cool. I'm very much a people person. I love meeting new people, I love helping people, and as the SGA President, I get to meet and help so many one-of-a-kind people, students and staff alike. I think that's my favorite part.

Q. What's been the biggest challenge for you as president?

A. To be honest, the most difficult thing is getting students involved in SGA. There are many who like to voice their opinions or grievances, but it's been harder to find students willing to put in the work to bring about necessary change.

Q. Describe the ways you seek input from students on campus issues.

A. Our bi-weekly SGA meetings offer a time when the floor is opened for any students to be allowed to speak about whatever is on their minds. I hold weekly office hours when students can come and talk to me about anything, and I'm always accessible by email.

Q. Based on such input, what do students like about the recent enrollment growth?

A. I don't have an answer for this one. I've not been given a lot of positive feedback on this from an SGA standpoint.

Q. What most concerns them about the growth?

A. With a growing student population, housing has been a widespread concern of students since day one.

Q. What issues and tasks have occupied most of your attention as president?

A. Making necessary amendments to the SGA Constitution is taking up most my work time. This process involves delicate, detailed work. The changes are mostly minor in nature, grammatical errors, clarifications, etc. The biggest change is specifying that, while any enrolled Wesleyan student is considered an SGA member, voting membership at SGA meetings is being more strictly defined throughout the document.

The intent is to ensure that those who vote on SGA bi-laws and proceedings are students such as residence hall representatives, organization representatives, the SGA Executive Board, and senators, who are already involved in and committed to SGA.

Besides making changes to the constitution, I'm also working to get a food services committee started. Its purpose is to provide student feedback to Sodexo.

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Sports Memory: The Longest 5K I Will Ever Run

By Hannah Ivester
Decree Staff Writer

(Editor's Note: The Decree launches a new, occasional feature—Sports Memories. Bishop athletes recall a memorable event from their athletic careers. Turn to page 4 for similar features.)

It was the first race of the season: An early September 5K race at the Catawba Chick-fil-A Invitational. We had a brand-new coach, a brand-new team, and for the first time in decades—a men's squad. The park was pretty under the early autumn sun, the dew glistening off the thick, green grass. The familiar smell of peanut oil-fried chicken, also known as the gloriousness that is Chick-fil-A, permeated the air (they were selling it at the concession stand). Wesleyan had six runners that day and in cross country, if you have fewer than five, your team technically doesn't qualify for the race. If you only have five runners, an injury on the course could disqualify your race. Those first five runners determine the score for the team and I was slated to be a one of our top five. I was ready to run.

Our men had finished their race, a brutal 8K with horrible footing from the rain the night before. Carlos, a freshman at the time, had just run his first collegiate race. I was proud of him; he had a great finish. As he jogged past us to head back to the blue canopy, I jumped up to give him a celebratory high-five. When I landed, my foot slipped

in the dewy grass, and my ankle gave out. I heard a sickening pop, like something out of an athlete's worst nightmare. Now, I've rolled my ankles before, and in fact, my ankles kind of suck. They always required some sort of support and I was actually wearing an ankle brace that day... on the other ankle. I stood up and my teammate, Sarah, asked if I was okay. I told her yes, decidedly, and took about two steps and fell to the ground. I groaned, "No, I'm not." I felt the hot tears start to well up in my eyes. I scoured the crowd for help.

My parents had come down to watch me run this race, the only one they'd make that season. As I was sitting on the cold, wet ground, I kept thinking how disappointed they were going to be that they wouldn't see me run. I locked eyes with my dad as soon as they arrived, and he bolted over to me. Through my tears, I told him what had happened, and he scooped up and carried his sobbing child over to the athletic training tent while my teammates headed to the starting box. I sat down and the trainer looked at me, eyes wide as saucers. The two-minute call rang out as I sat there, my ankle throbbing, pain radiating through my foot and up my leg. The trainer started wrapping my ankle, trying to keep the swelling down. Coach looked at me, his eyes mirroring the pain in mine. He peered over his shoulder to the starting line, watching my teammates warm up. As he turned back around, I heard him ask, "So... are you going

to run?" I looked at the three men around me—not wanting to disappoint my dad and knowing I was still a scoring runner, I announced, "I'm running this race." The trainer's shook his head in disbelief, as my dad kept repeating "You don't have to." My coach said, "Don't run it fast. Just finish."

When my ankle was wrapped, I thanked the trainer and stepped off the table. That first step was the worst one, the impact of the ground against my tender ankle sending a chilling shock of pain that radiated throughout my leg. I heard the one-minute warning and I knew I had to hurry. I took a deep breath and trotted over to the starting box, imagining myself leaving the pain at the training tent. I had stood in the box for about 30 seconds when the announcer came on the bullhorn: "Runner's to your mark." I stayed put. "Set." I still didn't move. Gunshot. I took the first three steps out of the box, surrounded by other runners, and a rush of adrenaline hit me. The pain was still there, but it dulled to the point of annoyance rather than something that commanded my attention. We entered the woods.

The tacky mud held on to my shoes. I felt like I was running through bubble-gum, each step pulling my ankle from its place, trying to make me stop. As runner after runner passed me, I willed my feet to keep moving. Each step melted into another as I refused to stop.

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