

CAMPUS LIFE

Dean of Students Jason Modlin: A Passion for His Work

By Will Plyler
Senior Staff Writer

I sat down with NCWC's new Dean of Students, Dr. Jason Modlin, in his office in September to get to know him a little bit better. The walls were decorated sparsely, like he hadn't been there very long. What was there, papers on the desk, books on the shelf, were all well organized and in neat stacks.

The dean was dressed in a purple button-down shirt, slacks, and a bold purple tie covered in pirates, tying him to the university where he received his master's degree in 2000.

One prominent item in the room was a sign on the windowsill which read, "I am silently correcting your grammar."

An English major in college, Modlin said he started keeping the sign in his office, as a joke, when he worked at Louisburg College. "My staff used to make fun of me," he said, laughing. "They said they were scared to send me an email because the first thing I would do is correct it."

Modlin, 47, grew up in the small town of Bellhaven, with his brother and sister on their parents' 20-acre farm. Their cash crop was tobacco, but they also raised hogs and grew corn, soybeans, and wheat.

As a child, Modlin worked labor-intensive jobs on the farm, sowing seeds and selling cured tobacco leaves. "I enjoyed growing up on the farm," he said, "though I didn't realize until later how much I was learning about life."

He credits the experience with helping to develop his work ethic. "There's no handouts in life," he said. "Nothing is given to you. I (somewhat) hated working on the farm, but I look back and really appreciate my dad throwing me in the tobacco patch."

Growing up in Bellhaven also cemented a unique set of values in Modlin's life. He lived among family and a tight-knit community. "Everybody knows everybody," he said. "I could go outside and ride my bike up and down the road. I could be two miles away from my parents. There wasn't much to fear."

Modlin said that he had no plan when he graduated high school. "The night I graduated, it hit me," he said. "I had no idea what I was going to do."

Though he had no desire to go to college, he realized in that moment that he wanted more than the life of a tobacco farmer.

"I wanted to be rich!" the dean said. "So, I went down to the local community college and got signed up real quick."

After a year of community college classes, he transferred to the University of Mount Olive, still known as Mount Olive College at that time.

He started out as an accounting major, figuring that was a good way to make money. "Corporate finance and cost accounting kicked me out of that," he said. "The math part of my brain is not the strongest." After a semester, he changed his major to English, and he graduated with a bachelor's in 1994. He also worked as a resident advisor (RA) during his time at UMO.

After graduation Modlin went to work for a Rent-a-Center, a job he soon came to hate. At the time, his girlfriend, Ami, was working

as an RA at his alma mater, and the school was looking for a new director in a men's residence. "I had been an RA as an undergrad," he said, "so I thought, 'hey, I'll throw my hat in the ring.'" Modlin soon found himself working in residence life at UMO, even though he had had no intention of doing this kind of work when he started college four years earlier.

In December of 1996, Ami graduated, and she and Modlin were married. They spent their first few months of marriage living in the residence halls. "It was neat... the first few months," he said about living on campus as newlyweds. "We were both pretty much the same age as the college students. It was almost like we never left."

Though they enjoyed being around friends, eventually this arrangement became a bit troublesome. "People knocking at 10, 11, 12 o'clock at night needing this and that," he recalled. "For newlyweds, that didn't work so well."

The couple left UMO in 2000, but Modlin knew he wanted to continue working in student affairs. That year he earned his master's degree in adult education from East Carolina and soon started a new job at Louisburg College. He started as the Assistant Dean of Students, and after five years was promoted to Vice President for Student Life.

"When I graduated from college, I never dreamed that I would stay in student affairs," he said, "but I just fell in love with working with students, serving them, meeting their needs, helping them with day-to-day stuff."

Modlin said that he had seen many promising students drop out of college due to circumstances outside of school. "Life happens while you're in college," he said. "You don't get to put life on

pause, go to school, and come back."

The dean has found it rewarding to help students work through difficult circumstances and finish their college education. He said that his favorite day—his "pay-day"—has always been commencement.

"I'm able to see students cross the stage and I look at them and I know that I helped that student when they were a freshman to overcome an obstacle, or I helped that student with a relationship issue, or I helped that student with a financial aid problem. It's a small piece in their journey, but knowing that you played a little role in getting them to graduation, to me that's very rewarding."

After 19 years at Louisburg College, the dean felt that it was time for a change. "I had put in place every initiative and program I thought would help," he said. Because he is passionate about his work, he wanted a similar job. "I wanted to do the same thing, but to do it somewhere differently."

Modlin knew he wanted to stay in the local area. He, Ami, and their three daughters already lived in Nash County. His wife worked for Southern Bank in Rocky Mount, and his daughters attended Northern Nash High School.

The dean also wanted to work in a smaller, faith-based school, similar to Louisburg and UMO. Modlin's Christian faith has played an important role in his life ever since his early years in Bellhaven. As a child, he spent almost every weekend in Sunday school. He now he serves as a deacon at Calvary Baptist Church in Rocky Mount, and he went on his first international mission trip to Belgium last summer.

When the position at NCWC became available, Modlin knew he was "called to be here."

Q & A: Student Government President Tom Clark

President Tom Clark, now in his second one-year term, said the college's Student Government Association is proceeding with its work despite the pandemic.

In a late-September interview, he talked about SGA, his newest colleagues on the executive board, online courses, the overall mood of the student body, as well as the importance of setting an example for his peers.

Q. Let's start with football. You're a backup quarterback. What have you been doing in terms of practice and workouts?

A: We started in 10-man pods conducting voluntary workouts on our own. I took the time to help teach some of the younger guys how the offense operates and tried to get back into some sort of rhythm. After about two weeks of that, we moved on to 24-man pods and began our strength and conditioning phase. We ran six days a week and we would alternate lifting schedules and on-field stretching or flexibility training and individual practice. For example, my pod would run every day Monday-Saturday, we stretched on Mondays and Fridays, did flexibility training on Wednesdays, and we would have mini practice sessions on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. We start official practice on 1 October. *(Editor's Note: In early October, the college put a hold on all athletic practices due to an uptick in Covid cases on campus.)*

Q. Talk about your own class schedule so far. How's it going?

A: I'm taking an exercise science class, History of the South, the senior seminar for history, War and American Society, Research Methods for Criminal Justice, and Legal Writing and Research. My senior seminar class is the only one that meets in person every class period. My research methods class is all online. All my other classes meet once a week in person and virtually the other days.

Q. How do you feel about the way instruction has been delivered this term?

A: The hardest part is most classes, in a normal semester, require some in-person work. But such opportunities have been lost in many courses. For example, in Dr. Sarris' upper-level history courses, it is typical to play "Reacting to the Past" games. These games are designed to be conducted in-person, but can't be under COVID restrictions. We manage to an extent, but the game would be much better in person. I miss the social aspect of many classes. I understand the need for virtual learning, but I certainly don't prefer it.

Q. What are you hearing from other students about their courses?

A: I'm hearing some of the same comments. We just miss the social aspect of everything. College is a lot about your social life as well as learning.

Q. As SGA president, what do you see as your role in terms of enforcing the Covid rules on campus?

A: I try to do my best to lead by example and do what's necessary. I may remind my friends, and people I know, to follow the rules and I remind them that doing so it will help loosen restrictions sooner. But I see it to be outside my power to really enforce them heavily. I'm the leader of the student populace, but I'm not a superior to them in any way. My job is to lead them and listen to their concerns and then make decisions and changes based on what's needed.

Q. How has the Wesleyan student body responded to the situation? What grade would you give students as far as observing rules?

A: I know students, even me, are not thrilled with the restrictions. I certainly hear more negative talk of the restrictions than positive. I would give the student body a B+ because, although there have been some scares, we haven't had any booms or spurts in positive cases.

Q. How would you characterize the overall mood on campus?

A: Anxious. We're all anxious for the return of normal life. Covid has drained not just students but the faculty and staff as well. I think we all just want the pandemic to end so we can go back to some semblance of normal life.

Q. Turning to SGA, tell us about your new executive board members.

A: My two newest members are Alton Farmer and Ron Newsome. Alton was elected vice president back in March. Al is a great guy with endless leadership potential. He can tap into so many different groups and make friends with just about anyone. He has a zeal to do good by the student body and I'm certain he will be a great VP.

Ron Newsome is the new parliamentarian. He ran against Al in the VP race, and although he lost, I wanted him to be a part

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must leave, they should wear their masks continuously, stay six feet away from others, and wash their hands frequently. Recent studies have shown an increased rate of infection in individuals who go out to eat so they may also want to avoid doing that.

Q. What other guidance would you like to offer to members of the NCWC community to ensure health and safety?

A: I think that just wearing masks, social distancing, and limiting contact off campus is the key to staying safe at this point.

Q. How would characterize the overall effectiveness and implementation of Wesleyan's response so far?

A: So far, I'm pleased with how we're doing. Despite skyrocketing cases in the county, we have remained pretty low in terms of actual positive cases.

Q. At this point, do you expect that Wesleyan will operate this coming spring much like it is now, with many online and hybrid courses?

Modlin hopes to create an inclusive, nurturing, and satisfying environment on the NCWC campus. "This involves a lot of listening, assessment, and collaboration," he said, "and I look forward to continuing that work for the benefit of our students."

In his free time, Modlin likes to work in his yard. Though he admits he usually prefers mowing grass and trimming branches to gardening, during the Covid-19 quarantine, he and his family planted a flower garden together in their front yard.

"We'd been in our house for seven years and talked about putting a garden up there, but we'd never done it," he said. "But when everything shut down in the spring, we went and got all the materials and made our Covid garden."

As was the case in his childhood, family still plays a major role in Modlin's life. He and his wife have three daughters (a 17-year-old and 14-year-old twins). The family enjoys taking day trips together to places such as the bird sanctuary in Scotland Neck, the beach, and Busch Gardens, an amusement park in Virginia.

"My daughters love (it)," Modlin said with a chuckle, "so we had to become members there. I enjoy the park itself; they enjoy the rides. Being with them and watching them have fun is what I love the most."

Among his other favorites, Modlin is a big fan of strawberry ice cream. He also likes anything with peanuts. His favorite color is East Carolina purple.

As I sat up from my meeting with Dr. Modlin and thanked him for his time, I couldn't help but be impressed by his heart for students. And as my eyes rested on the sign in his windowsill, I chuckled and said, "I'll do my best to make sure my grammar in the article is correct!"

of SGA. Ron is a very outspoken and social man. He has a unique charisma that brings people together. Like Al, he can tap into many different groups. These traits are necessary when you're trying to represent the entire student body. These two will make not only SGA better but the campus better.

Rebecca Mitchell returns as the secretary and Tim Marinos reprises his role as the treasurer. I'm blessed to have these four on my executive board. They're great students and even better people. Without them, my job would be a lot harder.

Q. How have you been conducting SGA meetings?

A: All face to face. I don't like or trust technology to the point of hosting SGA meetings virtually, and the meetings are an important part of student life. Through the meetings we can look to make change and push the ball forward on improving the campus for students. We've relocated to the Garner Lobby to accommodate social distancing regulations. We require masks be worn.

Q. What have been your priorities this term?

A: Of late we've been trying to get some of our committees up and functioning like normal. For a while we had to wait to see if we (the student body) were going to be staying on campus or not, so we weren't able to start up the Food Committee or the Res-Life Committee until recent weeks. We're also focusing on ways to make student life feel as normal as possible to help ease the discomfort and displeasure we're all feeling with Covid. Lastly, we're looking for ways to further embed SGA into the student body. We're trying to enhance our marketing. We want to be more pro-active in engaging students. Instead of waiting for students to come to us, we're coming to them.

A. It's hard to predict the future, but, if I had to guess, I would not expect a lot of changes for next semester.

Q. What's the likelihood that the college returns to "normal" classes in fall 2021?

A. Again, I can't predict the future but I'm hopeful the pandemic will be largely contained by then.

Q. When do you expect a vaccine to be widely available?

A. There are so many factors that will influence this. Some companies hope to have a vaccine within the next few months. However, the first round of vaccines will likely be reserved for healthcare workers or others at high risk. I'm hopeful that there will be a widely available vaccine by late spring.

Q. You've been a physician's assistant for 15 years. How does the past seven months compare to other periods during your career?

A. This year is unlike anything I've experienced in practicing medicine, either here at Wesleyan or elsewhere.



Adrian Moore ('18), the college's Male Athlete of the Year in 2017, has returned to campus to serve in a dual role as an admissions counselor and an assistant coach for the men's basketball team. SJ photo

NCWC Faculty Vote To Express Support Of Black Students

(Note: On Monday, August 24, the Faculty of North Carolina Wesleyan College voted and passed the following statement in support of Black lives. Below the statement, you will find its authors and original endorsers—Dr. Molly Wyatt.)

We the faculty of North Carolina Wesleyan College affirm that Black lives matter. George Floyd's life mattered. Breonna Taylor's life mattered. Elijah McClain's life mattered. Keith Collins's life mattered.

It is undeniable that racism—in both its overt and its systemic forms—is alive and well. We owe it to our students, to our community, and to each other to decelerate whiteness and to prioritize fighting racism in all aspects of our work. This is particularly important because our campus exists on land that was once a plantation, includes a building built for a slave owner, and is in a city split across two counties along racial lines. We affirm the need for this fight to be more than symbolic or rhetorical: we must materially support these efforts on an institutional level by developing institutional support for anti-racist pedagogies, by reviewing our hiring practices, and by developing more venues for students, faculty, and staff alike to learn from one another.

We recognize that we all have a great deal more to learn and a great deal more work to do. To start, we will take the following steps. We will develop active support for anti-racist teaching through the Teaching and Learning Center. We will carefully review our faculty recruiting, hiring, and promotion practices to prevent institutionally reproducing white supremacy in these processes. We will host public forums to discuss the ways that racism shapes our everyday experiences. We will use these meetings to discuss our next steps and to develop a community-based action plan with direct input from faculty, staff, and especially students. We also call to establish a committee tasked with coordinating these actions and with ensuring that such programs remain an active, high-priority focus for the college in the future.

We fully commit ourselves to doing the work necessary to substantively support our students—especially our Black students and students of color. We are not making this statement in an attempt to enter into a partisan political debate but to live up to our college's stated beliefs: "We affirm the basic rights of all persons to equal access to education and to spiritual growth within the college. We deplore acts of hate or violence against groups or persons based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, or economic status, and offer a climate of openness, acceptance, and support to enable all persons to participate fully in the life of the college. We seek to create a community of scholarship and learning that facilitates social and academic participation as an inclusive right for all." These values are central to our work as educators. In addition to taking the collective actions outlined above, we call on one another and on all members of our campus community—especially the white and non-Black members of this community—to commit to doing the sometimes difficult, sometimes painful work of educating ourselves on systemic racism. We must do better.

Signed,
Jason Buel
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