

# THE DECREE

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NORTH CAROLINA WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY, ROCKY MOUNT, NORTH CAROLINA 27804

## Wesleyan Seeks to Address Steep Drop in APS Enrollment

Buffeted by Covid, a low national unemployment rate and other factors, North Carolina Wesleyan has seen enrollment in its adult degree program fall by 52 percent in the last five years.

According to data furnished by the university, total enrollment has decreased from 899 to 432 since fall of 2017. Besides the main Rocky Mount campus, the university operates eight satellite campuses, from Winston-Salem to Wilmington.

The Rocky Mount site's enrollment has declined from 315 to 228 during the five-year period, while more precipitous drops have been recorded in Goldsboro (167 to 26), the Triangle (161-57) and Wilmington (95-24). This fall Manteo and Washington each enrolled one student.

In November, the Decree interviewed school officials about steps that Wesleyan is contemplating to arrest the recent slide in enrollment. Katie Farrell is the Associate Dean of Adult and Professional Studies for Strategy, Partnerships & Assessments. Prior to becoming Wesleyan's President, Dr. Evan Duff worked in the field of adult studies for many years.

**Q:** No doubt Wesleyan is providing an essential service to various communities by offering a college education to adult learners. But in what ways is a flourishing APS program vital to the success of Wesleyan's traditional-day program as well? Make connections, whether in terms of revenues or other benefits/synergies.

**ED:** Since APS's inception in the mid-1970s, its revenue has supported traditional campus operations. It's worth noting that, even when enrollment is declining, APS is always a profitable revenue stream. Aside from revenue, APS serves as an extension of our traditional enrollment, human resources, and fundraising initiatives. Some of our APS students' children choose our traditional program to further their education, and we've hired APS graduates for faculty and staff positions. Another way APS benefits the traditional day program is through the philanthropic support graduates provide to our yearly campaigns. We'll continue to leverage our relationship with APS students/alum by developing partnerships with their organizations for recruiting and career development.

**Q:** Explain the overall importance of operating satellite campuses in an adult-degree program rather than, say, one main campus that offers students around the state the ability to take online classes.

**ED:** A local presence has proven vital in establishing our value and building trust with students. Through our community college partnerships, we've lowered or eradicated the cost of providing service to students in their communities.

**Q:** How did Covid impact APS students in particular?

**ED:** While the data is still out on this, Covid had a more significant effect on APS than our traditional program. Working adults were impacted with a higher level of uncertainty about the future while continuing to juggle all the complexities of adult life

(i.e., kids, aging parents, loss of income, changes in their support systems). Although many thought this pandemic recession would increase enrollment, the reality was the exact opposite.

**Q:** National and state unemployment rates have been hovering between 3.5 to 4 percent in the last year. Can you make a correlation between low unemployment and APS enrollment?

**ED:** Typically low unemployment rate corresponds to lower enrollment in most adult programs. Adult degree programs tend to see higher enrollments during recessions. What the nation is experiencing now is unlike anything we've seen in the past. You have low unemployment, younger adults (25-40) finding alternative ways to generate revenue, and harmful societal commentary on higher education's value (i.e., return on investment). Together, such factors make it challenging to demonstrate to adults the importance of furthering their education.

**Q:** Let's talk about the competition. First which programs are the leaders in adult education around the state?

**KF:** Historically, our competitors were other small, private, liberal arts schools, such as Barton and Mount Olive, that of-

fered programs specific for adult students. With the increasing presence of certain not-for-profits schools as well as for-profit online institutions, we've seen a shift in the adult-education landscape. We're now competing with institutions such as Capella (for-profit) and Western Governors University and Southern New Hampshire (both non-profits). And although we tend to serve a different market than the state institutions, due to cost we continue to face competition from East Carolina as well as schools like UNC-Pembroke that offer the NC Promise tuition rates.

**Q:** How do you explain the recent success of Western Governors and Southern New Hampshire?

**KF:** Greater funding is a major component to their success. It allows them to spend more money in marketing and program development (WGU has really been a force, with over 4,000 North Carolina adults who have matriculated to their programs). And WGU and Southern New Hampshire (not to mention Capella) offer low tuition as well as competency-based educational programs that makes them more appealing to the adult learner who wants to complete a degree faster.

**Q:** Could you elaborate on compe-

tency-based educational programs?

**KF:** It measures skills and learning outcomes based on the student's ability to demonstrate mastery of a topic by completing assessments. And it does so on a non-traditional schedule. Rather than using "classroom time" as one measure, competency-based education allows students to complete the assessments at their own pace.

**Q:** What other trends have led to recent declines in Wesleyan's APS enrollment?

**KF:** Like other organizations, Wesleyan was impacted by "The Great Resignation" with some of our staff moving onto new industries. It's been a challenge to fill staff openings while competing with companies that offer fully remote positions.

**Q:** Let's talk about possible changes Wesleyan may make to address the recent drop in enrollment. Is the university considering closing or scaling back some of its nine campuses?

**ED:** At this time, we have no plans to reduce our number of locations. We've consolidated our course offerings, reduced our dependency on stand-alone facilities by partnering with community colleges, and established partnerships to improve the affordability of our programs with community

college staff. Among other changes, we're considering improved digital marketing, personalized marketing campaigns, and enhanced program offerings. A task force, primarily composed of faculty, will explore research and best practices over the next few months to make recommendations on further possible changes.

**Q:** Has Wesleyan considered changing the APS program to 100 percent online? What would be the pros and cons of such a move?

**KF:** Over the past few years, APS has seen an increase in demand for fully online programs. In light of this, we're working with Provost (Joseph) Lane and our faculty to examine the feasibility of offering more classes online. We'll continue to offer seated classes at our larger locations and we're piloting remote synchronous formats to allow students from other locations to participate in seated courses. It's essential that we find the balance between course formats to ensure flexibility, while also providing the most effective learning environment for our adult students.

**Q:** What other changes, such as tuition reductions and new majors/certificate programs, have been considered to grow enrollment?

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## Science Students Enjoy Field Study, Hunt for Nurdles at NC Beach

By Rhea Wilder  
Decree Staff Writer

One day I received a text message with a link to a TikTok video about nurdles. I had never heard of nurdles until this video taught me that they're preproduction plastic pellets. They're shipped all over the world and melted down to make everything from car parts to utensils.

Because they're so small, it's thought that many nurdles spill from shipping containers and enter sewage systems, not to mention rivers and streams, and eventually travel to the ocean. They can also enter the ecosystem as waste discharged from manufacturing facilities.

These microplastic pellets are damaging to the environment because they look like little eggs and animals (e.g. turtles) and fish eat them and feel full, leading to starvation. Not only that, but when fish absorb nurdles through breathing, the substance can get into their system and affect their movement, mating behavior and ability to escape predators.

Humans can be affected by consuming nurdle-contaminated seafood and other wildlife. Nurdles can also dissolve and contaminate the drinking water supply. "And once the substance is inside us," Dr. Elias said, "the body's response might be chronic inflammation and abnormal growths."

No one knows exactly what effect nurdles have because they aren't regulated as they should be; no one knows how many are lost in the environment. According to NurdlePatrol.org, mass production of nurdles has occurred since the 1950s and the first evidence of their environmental presence was documented in 1972. Their known effects can be deadly, and continued research will only aid in developing regulation policy and producing solutions to prevent further damage.

As an environmental science



In search of environment-damaging "nurdles," Wesleyan students, led by Dr. Daniel Elias, took a field trip to the Outer Banks in late November.

Wilder/Elias photo

major, I was intrigued by all this, so I forwarded the TikTok link to Dr. Elias. He discovered that the University of Texas is doing a citizen-run research project to better understand the amount of nurdles that are scattered across the world. Wanting to be part of this research, he contacted UT and got instructions on how to become part of the "Nurdle Patrol."

A trip was planned to the Outer Banks. When I asked Dr. Elias why he likes to take these trips, he said, "I take them because I want my students to have real-life experiences because what they learn in class is only half of the learning process. It's when what you learn becomes real."

After getting the funding from the Wesleyan Science Club, our group was ready to collect data. On Saturday November 12th at 7 a.m., there were 24 students of different majors loading the bus to travel to Outer Banks.

We were greeted by a driver named Mr. Booze. "Like the alcohol," he said. This would normally make me concerned as he was driving us, but I was acquainted with him from traveling to soccer games in the last few years and knew that we were in good hands.

As I'm not a morning person, I

sat in the front seat eager to go back to sleep. Three hours later, we arrived at the beach. We thought that it was going to be cold there, but it ended up being about 70 degrees and sunny, which was perfect weather for us to conduct our research.

For ten minutes we searched the

sand for nurdles in a single file line, staying an arm's width apart from each other. We moved forward two times to new locations and spent ten minutes at each spot. Mr. Booze even helped us search and grinned in excitement when Dr. Elias confirmed that he had potentially found a few nurdles.

Most of us struggled to tell if the objects we were picking up were nurdles or pieces of glass. As a result of this, one of the science students, Andy Rizzo, was trying to produce ways to test if they were indeed nurdles. She suggested melting them to determine the difference between plastic and glass. "We could also see if they float as a way to determine the difference," Rizzo said.

I loved overhearing her excitement because all things environmental excite me too. Following the search, we got to spend time at the same beach for an hour. A lot of the students got in the water with their clothes on or decided to play with a frisbee.

I spent the majority of the time searching for shark teeth in the sand. When I found one, it caused curiosity to spike, and a few other students started searching too. At one point, a big wave crashed on the sand

and chased me up the beach. Luckily I salvaged my energy drink and book, but the shark tooth was never seen again.

After leaving the beach, we picked up Subway for lunch and had a short drive to Jockey's Ridge State Park where we sat at picnic tables to eat. Dr. Elias told all of us that we had to meet back on the bus at three, but we were allowed to explore wherever we wanted within the park. Once we finished our subs, my friends and I decided to go walk the massive sand dunes.

The dunes were beautiful, and they made me feel small because they were so big. We climbed to the top of one and watched a woman who was learning how to hang-glide. After enjoying the view of the ocean for a while it was time to return to the bus.

Mr. Booze took us back to campus. He joked that if we were missing a student, they would have a long walk back to Rocky Mount. I stared at the sunset for a long time reflecting on the trip as we drove home.

This trip was an amazing experience, but it came with mixed feelings. I'm glad that I didn't come across any nurdles in my search because that means they weren't easy enough for wildlife to find. But I'm troubled because they were probably there, and we just weren't looking in the correct spot.

I asked Dr. Elias what he believed was the reason for the apparent scarcity of nurdles and he said that the weather—there was a storm a few days earlier—could have played a role. "Since some nurdles float, carried by currents, extreme weather could have caused them to travel to other beaches or even stay in the ocean," he said.

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