

STUDENT EXPERIENCE
West Liberty University
Strategic Planning Task Force Concept Paper (2018-19)
Kate Billings, Jenna Cook, Matt Harder, and Aaron Harper

INTRODUCTION

Engaged students add to the life of campus, and they are more likely to apply what they have learned in the classroom through co-curricular activities. Student engagement provides opportunities for them to become active participants in all aspects of campus life through a diverse range of collaborative interactions with faculty, staff, and peers. This paper will explore the current student experience, while presenting some areas that might garner more focus in forthcoming stages of strategic planning.

Amenities

For the purposes of this paper, “amenities” refers to the infrastructure of West Liberty University as it relates to the overall student experience in the following categories: housing, food, parking, transportation, and academic facilities.

West Liberty University has six residence halls, three apartment complexes, six cabins, and several campus houses as part of its residential community. Collectively, the capacity of WLU residence halls is 1316 beds. The residence halls are currently 84% full (1108/1316 for the Fall 2018 semester). At the beginning of the Fall 2017 semester, 1050 students lived in WLU residence halls. About half of all WLU students live on campus; the other half are either commuters or distance learners. Recent changes to housing policies allow first year students to be housed in any residence hall, but preliminary findings show that the policy may lead to less engagement by first year students with Residence Life. WLU residence halls offer a variety of room schemes, shared bathrooms, single rooms, A/C, no A/C, etc. The number of one-occupant rooms (singles) has been increased due to demand.

The 2014-2019 Master Plan included the goal to attract more privatized housing on campus which may, in turn, attract private businesses to occupy the lower floors. Another new student housing complex is being built directly across the street from the main campus and the resulting apartments will be operated by an external company. Additional off-campus student housing can be found in the town of West Liberty, but those options are privately controlled and limited in number.

The university offers several options for food on campus including Subway, Wow Café, Slice of Life, Jazzman’s, and a buffet-style cafeteria called The Marketplace. Student satisfaction with campus food options is low, due in part to limited hours. It is interesting to note that visiting prospective students rate our food options and service very highly, whereas current WLU students rate the food service poorly.

The University has several parking lots in various locations and additional parking can be found along campus roadways. Students pay a \$40/semester parking fee and campus police routinely check for parking passes. Employees pay a \$50/year parking fee. Parking lots and spaces are labeled as “Student,” “Employee,” or “Visitor.” The results of a recent survey show that only a small percentage of students are happy with the parking situation on campus. Lack of spaces near classroom buildings is a particular

concern, with repeated suggestion that a centralized parking garage, if feasible, may improve the situation.

Regarding transportation options, the university has a contract for a fleet of vehicles (cars and vans) that can be used by employees for the purpose of conducting university business. Students with valid driver's licenses are allowed to drive said vehicles only for an approved trip with faculty guidance and only after passing a special state driver's exam. WLU does not offer any kind of shuttle service for students who live off campus; a shuttle between the main campus and the Highlands campus has been suggested.

Many campus facilities suffer from extensive deferred maintenance. This lies in stark contrast to the new facilities that have recently been built, including Campbell Hall of Sciences, West Family Athletic Complex, and Belmont Savings Bank Indoor Practice Facility. In a recent survey, students commented that athletics appears to receive more funding and publicity than education. Recently, a \$5 million bond was obtained in order to finish several projects: West Family Athletic Complex, the fourth floor of Campbell Hall of Science, and Arnett Hall of Science. The Belmont Savings Bank Indoor Practice Facility remains unfinished and a fundraising campaign is underway to pay for its completion. Many other facilities, such as the Hall of Fine Arts, Shotwell Hall, the Interfaith Chapel, Elbin Library, and College Hall suffer the most from deferred maintenance. HVAC problems are rampant in these locations. The previous Institutional Master Plan indicated that the Hall of Fine Arts should be demolished and classrooms would be moved to Arnett Hall and Main Hall, given appropriate funding.

Non-Academic Student Life

Non-academic student life is comprised of activities and programs that are designed to encourage success both inside and outside of the classroom. They are geared towards getting West Liberty students connected to the university, not just during their time here but for years to come. This experience includes clubs and organizations, campus activities, campus culture, athletics, and Greek life, among others.

West Liberty provides over 50 clubs and organizations. On average, a club on campus has 16 members, based on the 2017-2018 Student Services reports. Funding for these clubs is provided through Student Government funding applications. Students would like to have more input or control over funding for their organizations, and many organizations struggle to put on programs they would like or attend due to lack of funding. Many organizations lack areas that they have as their "own." Moreover, there are minimal spaces available for events or meetings, especially during late night hours from 10pm to 2am. Based on student input, including that from the Office of Housing and Student Life, there is an opportunity to expand student organization leadership opportunities through seminars, workshops, and guest speakers.

On average 4.2 events are put on per week by the Office of Housing and Student Life. The majority of these events are social in nature, but some are educational or community service oriented. Campus Activities provided programs for a total of 5,225 attendees during the 2017-2018 academic year, and in 2016-2017 there were 5,525 attendees. On average, each event had 37 students in attendance. This number does not include club and organization events open to campus, resident assistant programming in the residence halls, or other events put on by academic or student support offices. Weekend programs over the past 4 years have had mixed results. However, students have identified a lack of campus events

and weekend programming as an area of weakness. In general, students see a great need to invest in the student experience beyond just having more available hour; in particular, they would like more “fun” amenities such as a movie theater or bowling alley.

Even though the University is providing services and connecting students, student surveys have shown that the students view many of our non-academic student life experiences as just “average”. One area that did score above average was the Center for Arts and Education, with almost 20% of students surveyed ranking it as excellent. The Center offers an open “maker space”, limited free printing, and a stress-free environment with fun colorful areas. This may be an area to look at for a blueprint to build upon student satisfaction.

Student Support Services

West Liberty University offers an array of academic and nonacademic student support services including, ADA accommodations, various first-year programs, undergraduate tutoring services, and health and counseling services. Although the student support services staff is comprised of qualified individuals, they have only an average reputation among students. This may be due, in part, to the small number of individuals tasked with offering these varied support services, who sometimes struggle to meet the demand for these services.

Academic Support Services

Accessibility, first-year programs, tutoring, and career services are provided by the Learning and Student Development Center and are overseen by a director, coordinator, and administrative assistant. Currently 53 students—approximately 2% of the population—receive academic accommodations. This number is likely held down because the students must initiate a request for academic support services, and Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) that students were provided in the K-12 system are not transferred to higher education institutions. Although an established clinical evaluation and documentation by a medical or mental health professional is preferred, the university will assist students who are seeking ADA accommodations for the first time, either through its own trained professionals or local clinics.

For some first-year students, support begins before their first semester with the Hilltopper Academy, a summer bridge program for those academically at-risk that engages students in mathematics, writing, critical thinking, study skills and time management activities. During their first semester, students take College 101, although many students and faculty regard it as ineffective. There is discontinuity across sections of College 101 given the assortment of instructors, and many students see no relevance for some of the required programming. Yet there are several major-specific sections of College 101 that successfully assimilate freshmen into their programs. Many WLU peer institutions have had success with retention, academic success, and student engagement by implementing a year-long College 101 course; at West Liberty, only students on academic probation enroll in a second semester of the course.

Peer tutoring is the most utilized academic support service, which is managed through TutorTrac software program. Students made more than 1,300 visits to the Learning Center for group and one-on-one tutoring sessions during the 2017-2018 academic year. A new initiative, the Academic Alert System, allows faculty to issue concerns to the student support services staff about a student’s behavior or performance.

In the 2017-2018 academic year, 62 alerts were recorded, although it seems that faculty use of this system is not yet widespread, and increased advertising or training should be considered.

Unfortunately, many of the academic support services at West Liberty University are limited by understaffing and an over-expansive set of responsibilities. WLU's Director of the Learning and Student Development Center/ADA Coordinator, for example, earns nearly 20% less than the state average, has more responsibilities than similar directors at other institutions, and performs much of the work without the the typical number of support staff.

Non-Academic Support Services

Health and counseling services at West Liberty University are accessible to all students and provided at virtually no cost. Student health services saw nearly 1600 patients in the 2017-2018 academic year, not including those to a partnering facility, Doctor's Urgent Care, for advanced testing and treatment. Student information is managed through Electronic Health Records, which allows for tracking of a student's health, counseling, and athletic training history.

The University offers free and confidential counseling services for students experiencing distress and mental health issues. The need and utilization of these services continues to increase, with nearly 7% of the student population attending more than 500 sessions during the 2017-2018 academic year. Students are offered off-campus, situation-specific resources, or referred to community mental health professionals when necessary.

Having only one nurse on campus means that there are no health services available on campus when she is absent, which limits her involvement in professional development and organizational participation. Likewise, the Accreditation Guidelines for University and College Counseling recommends one counselor per 1,133 equivalent full-time students, with our enrollment being more than double those guidelines. As the need for student support services continues to swell, the university will need to consider budget allocations in this area in order to provide prompt, effective student support.

Academic Student Life

Stakeholders identify West Liberty strengths to include the variety of academic programs and majors (especially relative to the size of the university), small class sizes, and qualified faculty that genuinely care about their students. Among the challenges to academic student life are concerns regarding the spaces available to students, especially areas that can be used for them to study, work, or relax. In the past few years, some new spaces have been made to accommodate such needs, including the development of a commuter lounge, veterans lounge, and lactation room in the College Union; however, evidence suggests that many students are not aware of these accommodations. And students report that many available study spaces are not designed optimally, such as the basement of the union. Furthermore, many find that these spaces have inadequate hours of availability. In particular, the library is not open late at night and has limited weekend hours. This semester, the library has added hours on Saturdays to better accommodate student needs, but further study of university student spaces seems appropriate.

Other significant aspects of student academic life concern matriculation and job placement. Faculty are seen by students, on the whole, as good mentors, but the effectiveness of advising is inconsistent across colleges, departments, and programs. WLU has implemented DegreeWorks (TopperTracks) in order to systematize the process. This program provides advisors and students a real-time account of student progress, including what requirements remain to be fulfilled. As with any new program, bugs and inconsistencies have been found on occasion.

Along with advising, students (and parents) today are more concerned than ever about job prospects upon graduation. Notably, the university lacks any formal job placement program beyond those within individual programs. The Learning and Student Development Center does partner with the Robinson Writing Center, alumni, local businesses and others to provide graduate and job fairs, mock interviews, application and resume assistance. Still, additional job placement resources are needed, especially for undergraduate students. West Liberty fares better when it comes to internships, but these too are offered inconsistently without any centralized organization or oversight. Many see increased internship possibilities as an opportunity that West Liberty can take advantage of, both with local businesses and in the population centers of western Pennsylvania.

Special Student Populations

An overall lack of diversity within the student population is a weakness for WLU. That being said, many subsets of students have distinct needs and interests. Three such student populations stand out.

Graduate Students

Graduate studies have grown remarkably in the past few years. In 2009, West Liberty had 47 graduate students, nearly all of which were in the M.A. Education program. By 2014, that number grew to 161, and by 2018 it nearly doubled again to 299 students. Due to an overall decline in undergraduate students, the graduate student population now comprises an even greater percentage of university students, increasing from 1.78% in 2009 to 5.94% in 2014, and in 2018 reaching 11.82% of the overall student population. Graduate programs now exist in four of the five colleges (education, sciences, business, and liberal arts), including recent additions in criminology, dental hygiene, and clinical psychology, along with degrees in professional studies. Graduate students share the need characterized previously for study spaces on campus. Additional needs arise with 12-month programs that don't follow the undergraduate academic calendar, including requests for 24-hour study locations and wellness center availability.

International Students

West Liberty has experienced growth in its number of international students. From 2008-2014 the population grew from 9 students to 51 students. Since then, the population growth has continued to 70 students in Fall 2018, representing 30 different countries on five continents. To accommodate the needs of these students, the International Student Office was moved this year from the College Union to the first floor of the reopened Shotwell Hall. This move provides the office with more space to utilize. International students share the student space needs described in previous sections. While increased transportation options to and from campus would benefit many students on campus, international students

face these problems to a greater degree than many others. The International Student Office provides only occasional transportation to the Highlands and limited transportation to the Pittsburgh airport and bus station.

Student-Athletes

Student-athletes enjoy the community support of their programs, but they wish to see their peers get more involved in the athletic game day experience. Given that student-athletes typically spend more time living on campus than other students, they are especially interested in campus amenities like facility and food availability at night, weekends, and other times when classes are not in session.

Questions for Consideration

- What is our identity in terms of being a residential or commuter campus?
- How can we better support student organizations with adequate financial resources and leadership programming?
- How can we commit to the improvement of student academic support services, including the Learning and Development Center, on matters of adequate staffing, effectiveness, and its reputation on campus?
- Is College 101 meeting the aims it was designed for?
- How can we provide timely and appropriate counseling and mental health services to meet the demands of the population?
- How might we rethink space utilization and availability on campus, especially for student use?