

The First Year Experience: A UWS College Perspective

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Susan Channels graduated from the University of Western Sydney in the late 1990s with a Bachelor of Arts degree and has extensive experience working in Student Administration. After a number of roles at UWS including managing Higher Degree Research Administration, Susan joined UWSCollege in 2008 to manage a major project consolidating student record systems. Susan currently holds the position of UWSCollege Registrar and is responsible for student services across 2 campuses including, systems and compliance, Student Centres, Indigenous support, timetabling and student support.

Susan has a Graduate Certificate in Educational Leadership from the University of Newcastle and is currently working on a minor research project to complete a Master of Educational Studies; Susans area of interest is open access to higher education

Within the context of Bradley reforms, pathway colleges are emerging as a major contributor to increasing participation rates in higher education. Many pathway colleges offer diploma programs equivalent to first year undergraduate degrees. These programs attract students who have aspirations of going to university but may not have met entrance requirements. Successful pathway college students then attend university in the second year of their program of choice.

UWSCollege is the pathway college for the University of Western Sydney. Located on two campuses, the College provides a unique experience for its students, where all students on campus are pathway/first year students.

This paper explores the UWSCollege student profile and how all infrastructure and student services revolve around the pathways/first year student experience, and prepare students for UWS.

The typical UWSCollege student is a school leaver. Students are drawn from western Sydney communities where higher education participation rates are low; many are first in family to attend university; and many are also from non-English speaking and/or migrant backgrounds. As a region, western Sydney has significant areas of low SES, which translates to UWS in comparison to the sector as having one of the highest participation rates of students from low SES backgrounds.

The UWSCollege student experience includes:

- Everyone on campus is a pathways/first year student. The start of the academic year becomes critically important. Emphasis is placed on enrolment processes and orientation events, as for the majority of students, this will be their first experience with the College;
- College students spend most of their face-to-face time in classrooms accommodating 20 students, and attend fewer lectures. There is therefore a high demand for smaller flat floor teaching spaces. Campuses are also well resourced in terms of computers placed in libraries, labs and student common areas;

- An academic calendar of 39 weeks instead of 26 and three terms instead of two semesters. This is a major operational challenge in terms of access to buildings and teaching spaces for maintenance, and timetabling becomes even more critical as a business process;
- Timetabling where students stay in the same group for most of their classes, developing strong networks and lifelong friendships; and
- On campus student support services geared towards the new student. Student Advisors, Student Activities Officers and Counselling services (from 2012) on each campus, ensuring a supported environment for transition from secondary to tertiary education.

The provision of a specialised first year student experience has now proven successful for UWS and UWSCollege. Results show that the UWSCollege student who would not have otherwise participated in higher education, will by their second year of program perform as well as if not better than their peers who have taken the traditional route. Furthermore, UWS was successful in the 2011 round of SAF/EIF funding to receive \$25.9m for the purpose of expanding UWSCollege onto a further 3 sites. Expansion will take place across two existing UWS campuses in greater western Sydney and a regional site at Lithgow.