

# **The UWSCollege Model: A holistic approach, it takes a community to raise a University student!**

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## **Abstract**

UWSCollege is a pathway provider and wholly owned entity of the University of Western Sydney. The Greater Western Sydney region is traditionally an area of low participation in higher education. Students in this region have typically experienced educational disadvantage. The majority of students studying at UWSCollege are the first in their family to study at tertiary level. Many are from low socio-economic and non-English speaking backgrounds.

The University of Western Sydney has a strong commitment to widening participation rates in higher education. This has placed UWSCollege in a unique position to develop a model to provide a pathway to students who would previously not have had an opportunity to study at university. Data collected over the past 5 years indicates that this model is successful.

The cornerstone to the UWSCollege model is an holistic approach to the student experience where the academic, pastoral and administrative support aspects are designed to support non-traditional participants. The model is both pre-emptive and wholly integrated. The key components are the three phases of the student experience: Getting Started, Going to College and Moving to University.

The focus of this paper will be to detail the key components of the UWSCollege model and demonstrate how the individual components are pre-emptive, integrated and prepare students for success in higher education. The success of this model will be demonstrated using current research, external audit and review outcomes, and an analysis of the College's key quality indicators that include student satisfaction and success.

## **Introduction**

UWSCollege is a pathway provider to the University of Western Sydney providing quality experiences to students in their first year of higher education. The Greater Western Sydney region is traditionally an area of low participation in higher education. The College's strategic purpose is to provide pathways to the university through academic programs (UWSCollege, 2013a). The College currently has over 2,500 students. This is an increase of 680% since 2008.

The former Australian Federal Government made a commitment to widen participation rates in higher education and had committed to a target of 20% of all participants in higher education in Australia coming from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds and that 40% of all young people under the age of 34 should have a tertiary qualification by 2025 (Bradley et al, 2008). To achieve these targets, the number of participants in higher education will need to grow. This growth will need to come from immigration, retention and new pools of students who would traditionally not have participated in higher education.

This places UWSCollege in a unique position to provide a pathway to higher education for students who would previously not have been able to study at university. To support the participation of underprepared students, UWSCollege has developed a model based on current research that allows non-traditional participants to enter higher education and to be successful in their studies. Engstrom and Tinto argue that "access without support is not opportunity" (2008). The UWSCollege model is focussed on providing that support.

The UWSCollege model specialises in the delivery of first year programs within an intensively supportive environment, the aim being to prepare students to go on and succeed in a traditional university environment. The cornerstone of the UWSCollege model is an holistic integrated approach to the student experience where the academic, pastoral and administrative support aspects are both pre-emptive and wholly integrated. The key components of the model are *Getting Started*, *Going to College* and *Moving to University*. Data collected over the past five years demonstrates that this model is successful.

This paper will outline the environment in which the University operates, detail the key components of the UWSCollege model and demonstrate how the individual components are pre-emptive, integrated and prepare students for success in higher education. The success of this model will be demonstrated using current research, external audit and review outcomes, and an analysis of the College's key quality indicators that include student satisfaction and success. The paper will conclude by identifying challenges for the future.

### **The University of Western Sydney and its region**

The Greater Western Sydney region is one of the most diverse communities in the world with over 150 nationalities. The region covers nearly 9,000 square kilometres and has a population of over 1,900,000 people (Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils, 2014).

Located in this region, the University of Western Sydney has over 40,000 students on six campuses (University of Western Sydney, 2012a).

The University of Western Sydney has the largest number of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds of any university in Australia. Over 50% of the student population are the first in their families to attend university and the number of students from non-English speaking backgrounds is double the sector average (University of Western Sydney, 2012b). Preliminary data in 2013 suggests that approximately 27% of domestic students enrolled at UWSCollege at the start of the year were from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, this is higher than the sector average in 2012 of approximately 18% (Department of Industry, 2012).

The University of Western Sydney has a strong commitment to its region and the people within it. One of the University's key objectives is to "create a first year experience that optimises first year retention and success" (University of Western Sydney, 2012c). A very important part of this strategy is the pathways to higher education provided by the UWSCollege model.

### **The UWSCollege model**

UWSCollege teaches only first year programs with dedicated campuses and teaching spaces. Significant investment by the Australian Federal Government and the University of Western Sydney has allowed UWSCollege to grow and expand its operations. This has allowed UWSCollege to provide opportunities to more students across the Greater Western Sydney region in purpose built teaching and learning facilities. The UWSCollege model has evolved over time to meet the changing needs of students. The College provides programs designed for students who may not have met the entry requirement to a degree program or who require additional support and preparation prior to entering University. The programs are either the equivalent to first year university level, or are university preparatory programs. Discipline areas offered include: business and commerce, information and communications technology, health science, science, engineering, construction management, arts, social science and nursing.

Students are supported by the UWSCollege model throughout all stages of the student life-cycle. The three key phases being:

- Getting started
- Going to college
- Moving to university

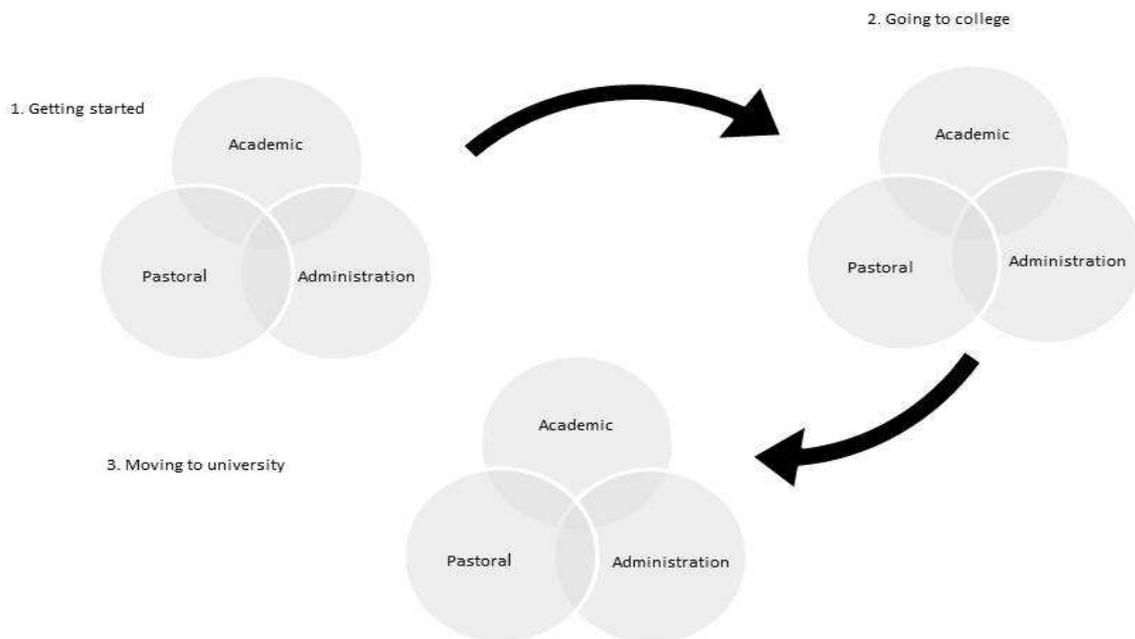


Figure 1. UWSCollege student life cycle

UWSCollege is able to provide, across the student life cycle, high levels of support to students by integrating the support services across all areas of the College including administration, pastoral support, teaching and learning and non-teaching business units: *It takes a community to raise a university student!*

Each phase of the life cycle is characterised by an integrated support model that is based on an institution-wide approach to the support of students in terms of their academic, pastoral and administrative support needs. Figure 2 below illustrates the intersection of support services across the various functional areas.

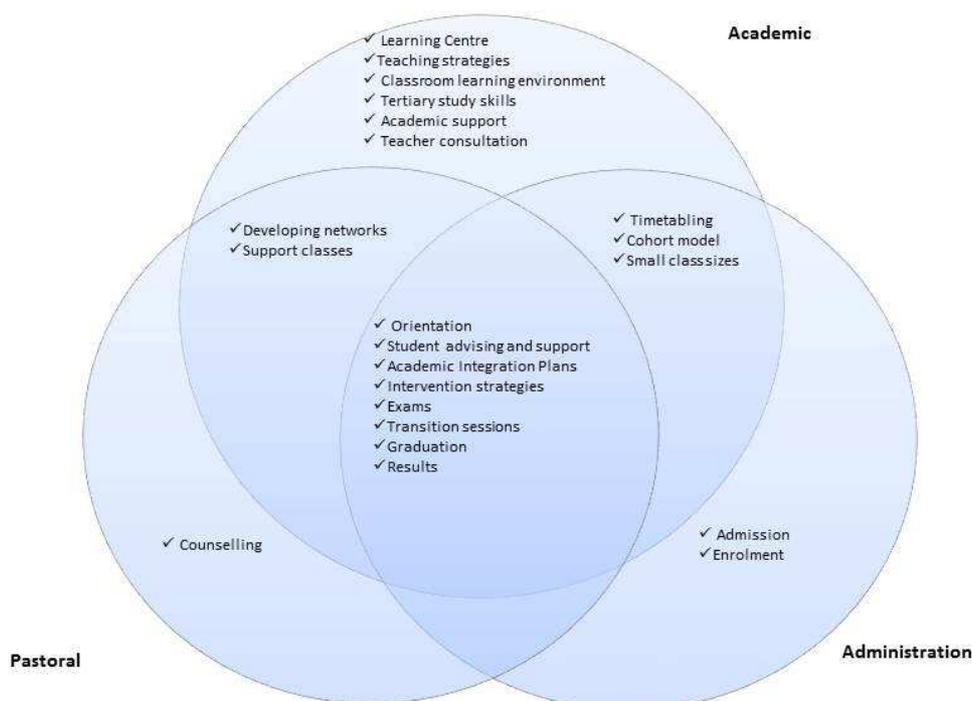


Figure 2. UWSCollege holistic approach to support services

The research indicates that the “transition to learning in higher education is challenging for the majority of students” (Thomas, 2012, p.42). This is especially so for non-traditional students as they do not have the required social capital to navigate university structures and systems. The majority of UWSCollege students fit the profile of “non-traditional” students.

Social capital can be thought of as the “resources that flow through relationship ties” (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011, p. 190). It is the inherited knowledge passed from one generation to another about how the system works and what is expected from university students. If university is not within a student’s world view, finding their way into and through university is very difficult (Cuthill & Jansen, 2013).

Two of the main theorists in this area, Bourdieu and Coleman look at social relationships as resources for individuals (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). Both believe that achievement in education rests not only in the skills and talents of an individual, but in the information, norms and support that the students have at their disposal (Bryan, et al., 2011, p. 190). While Bourdieu suggests that social capital is “inherited.” Coleman suggests that it can be built. The UWSCollege model seeks to support students as they build this social capital for themselves.

UWSCollege assists students in building social capital by offering an extensive range of support services. Support services are heavily promoted and students are encouraged to participate as a way of fostering engagement and a sense of belonging to a community.

A common theme in the research around the first year experience is the importance of an institution-wide approach. From an Australian perspective, best practice is described as having:

Support staff, academics and administrators work together to integrate their efforts and initiatives for the benefit of all students (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005, p.89).

A coordinated whole of institution partnership and consistent message about the first year experience across the university (Lizzio 2006 cited in Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010, p.10).

A shared knowledge and skills of partnered academic and professional staff in an institutional environment that is committed to an optimal FYE at the policy, resource and practice levels. Transition pedagogy transcends the silos of academic, administrative and support areas to enact a holistic, systematically-managed, vision for the FYE that is truly student-focussed (Kift et al., 2010, p.14).

The most succinct statement regarding the importance of the institution-wide approach comes from Kift et al, when they describe the First Year Experience as being “everybody’s business” (2010, p.1). This notion of “everybody’s business” is reflected in the College’s integrated approach.

The key to the success of the UWSCollege model, and the focus of the remainder of this paper, is the intersection of services delivered in an integrated and holistic manner. This is possible as the UWSCollege business model facilitates a close working relationship between business units.

The key components of the integrated and holistic model are:

### **Getting started**

Student orientation is a combined effort between the administrative and the teaching and learning staff to welcome students into the College community. Complementary sessions are designed to scaffold the information that is provided in a “just in time” approach. This ensures that students receive the information when they need it. Students see the College staff working together as a single unit to deliver presentations on enrolment, academic advice, study skills, life skills and course-specific information.

This approach is crucial, given the large percentage of UWSCollege students who are the first in their families to study at this level and may not have the social capital required to be successful in higher education.

### **Going to College**

The UWSCollege model provides extensive study support to students outside of class time. This support incorporates the College Learning Centre as well as Study, Life Skills and Exam Stress Management workshops that are delivered by teaching and learning staff working collaboratively with counselling staff. For students with special requirements, additional support is given through a specialist disabilities unit.

Key staff positions have been created to provide students with “just in time” support for issues that arise in their study as well as assisting them in transitioning to higher education. These positions include: Student Advisors, Counsellors, First Year Experience Co-ordinators and Activities Officers. These positions sit in different business units ensuring an institution-wide approach to student support. Some of this assistance includes help with administration processes as well as student activities and cultural events designed to promote student engagement. Inclusion in such activities allows students to feel supported and a part of the College community.

Intervention strategies are a key component of the UWSCollege model. The College has well-established strategies designed to identify issues that may impact on retention and/or success as early as possible. Any College staff member can initiate an Intervention Strategy, as can the student. Resources are drawn from throughout the College and beyond to develop an individualised strategy for students. Depending upon the nature of the

intervention, a combination of strategies may be implemented. These are usually co-ordinated by the Student Advisor working in conjunction with the First Year Experience Co-ordinator; an example of staff from different business units working together. Strategies include: one to one tutoring; counselling; pastoral support; a Learning Centre; support classes; academic workshops and non-academic workshops.

Student-friendly timetables are jointly designed by administration and teaching and learning staff to optimise student outcomes. The features of the timetable include small class sizes and extended face to face teaching hours, as compared to standard first-year university programs. Classes are scheduled across the week to maximise the opportunities for group work and study support, whilst recognising that students have other commitments, such as work and family.

### **Moving to University**

To prepare students for their move to university, the College conducts transition sessions. These sessions include perspectives of how to navigate the university enrolment processes, specific advice regarding choices of majors and units as well as “insider knowledge” to assist in providing the social capital needed for success in the transition. The transition sessions are delivered by administration staff working collaboratively with teaching and learning staff. Students who have already made the transition share their stories.

The College celebrates student success by conducting graduation ceremonies. For many students, this is a significant event and is often their first taste of academic success. The celebration is an important component of building student confidence in preparation for future studies.

### **Evidence supporting the UWSCollege model**

UWSCollege uses a range of evidence to monitor and analyse the effectiveness of its programs.

#### **Student success at university**

Since 2008, the UWSCollege model has assisted over 3,300 students who would not otherwise have gained entry to university to transition from UWSCollege to the first or second year of a degree at the University of Western Sydney (University of Western Sydney, 2014a).

University of Western Sydney progression data shows that students entering the first or second year of a degree after completing a program at UWSCollege are able to perform academically at similar levels compared to all students who entered a degree directly. When the progress rates of students who enter a degree after completing a UWSCollege program are compared with students who gained direct entry to the degree with a low entrance rank, the UWSCollege students are performing at least as well, and, in many cases better, than those who gained direct entry with a low entrance rank (University of Western Sydney 2014b).

The following table shows the progress rates of former UWSCollege students who have gone onto a degree at the University of Western Sydney. For comparative purposes, the table also includes the progress rates of commencing students across both New South Wales and Australia.

	2011	2012
<b>Progression of former UWSCollege students enrolled at the University of Western Sydney</b> (University of Western Sydney, 2014c)	78.53%	76.98%
<b>Progression of all commencing students: New South Wales</b> (Australian Government Department of Education, 2014)	84.62%	84.23%
<b>Progression of all commencing students: Australia</b> (Australian Government Department of Education, 2014)	84.44%	83.86%

*Figure 3. Progress rates*

Former UWSCollege students enrolled in degrees at the University of Western Sydney are progressing at rates slightly below the sector average for commencing students. This is compelling given that the majority of students who complete a program at UWSCollege would not have gained direct entry to a degree program.

#### Student satisfaction

The University of Western Sydney uses a number of internally published surveys including Student Feedback on Unit, Commencing Student Survey and a Foundation Studies Student Survey. These surveys are used to measure student satisfaction in aspects of teaching and learning as well as support services. Students are typically surveyed at commencement, during enrolment and when they complete. UWSCollege is able to monitor the satisfaction levels of students across the student life cycle. Satisfaction levels of students are consistently high. In a recent, as yet unpublished survey of students enrolled in the Foundation Studies program, students who were accessing both academic and non-academic support services indicated that these services were helpful. Open-ended responses included:

Because everyone cares for each other making you feel safe and have support of the college with you.

The communication is good, via email and billboards. I always know about activities that are happening (UWSCollege, 2013b).

Similar results were found in a survey conducted as a part of a benchmarking exercise in late 2012 with students enrolled in a Business program. Although these students were not accessing additional support at the same rates as those enrolled in Foundation Studies, which may be explained by a slightly higher admission rank, they were more likely to comment on the informal support and relationships they had with their teachers and the friendly environment on campus. Some examples of the responses to the question "What are the best things about the College" were:

Friendly staff members

Small, feel like teachers know us personally

The environment is friendly and staff are very helpful (UWSCollege, 2013c).

### Federal government auditing

In 2011, the University of Western Sydney was audited by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA). The agency stated that the purpose of the audit was to examine the effectiveness and existence of processes that the organisation had in place to meet its goals.

The final report contained commendations, affirmations and recommendations. A commendation, the highest accolade, was given when a stated goal was achieved, or was likely to be achieved, by the plans and actions that the University had in place.

The University received 12 commendations in total, one of which was for UWSCollege:

The University of Western Sydney is commended for its development of UWSCollege as a pathway for successful transition into university study for students from the Greater Western Sydney region (Australian Universities Quality Agency, 2011, p.31).

The commendation was public recognition of the excellent work being done by UWSCollege to create opportunities for students by providing alternative pathways for students who may not have gained entry to higher education otherwise.

### **Challenges**

As the political environment and the needs of our students change, so must the UWSCollege model. The biggest challenges currently facing the UWSCollege model are the changing needs of our student cohorts and managing the growth that comes with success.

It is likely that future growth will come from new pools of students who are different to those who have previously benefited from the UWSCollege model. Therefore, UWSCollege will need to adapt its model to meet the needs of a changing student body. Continuous monitoring of student success and satisfaction will inform this adaptation. To ensure an evidence-based practice approach, ongoing research is being undertaken within the College. Continued collaboration with other institutions would also be advantageous.

With significant continued investment the College expects to grow over the coming years. Growth needs to be carefully managed to ensure that the key components of the model are maintained. This is a particular issue given that the entire model is based on the close working relationships between business units, which can become more difficult with growth and multiple locations.

### **Conclusion**

The UWSCollege integrated and holistic model is producing students that are well prepared for university study. This is a significant contribution to the national widening participation agenda. The UWSCollege model enables students to gain the skills needed to be successful in higher education. This is evidenced by the success the UWSCollege students experience at university as well as the evidence showing that the student experience has been a positive one. To continue to provide opportunities to students into the future, UWSCollege will need to monitor the ongoing success and satisfaction levels of its students and be prepared to adapt and change as the political environment in which it operates evolves.

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