We are... Penn State Wilkes-Barre

In the 19th century, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, was a thriving industrial city, dominated by the abundance of anthracite coal in the region. College had been an opportunity reserved for a select few. By the beginning of the 20th century, the demand for local inexpensive post-high-school vocational training for the growing labor force increased. Penn State Wilkes-Barre, originally an extension school offering vocational training and certificate programs, in 2016 has expanded into an institution that offers eight baccalaureate degrees, four associate degrees, the opportunity to begin any one of Penn State's 160 majors, and numerous opportunities for continuing education. And yet, just as it did in 1916, Penn State Wilkes-Barre continues to offer small classes, personal attention, and community connections to its students. Throughout 100-year existence, Penn State Wilkes-Barre has always adapted to the needs of the community.
1910s
"Want Extension School"

In May 1916, Benjamin F. William (chief engineer of the Spring Brook Water Company) and Harry Montz (chief engineer of the Wyoming Division of the Lehigh Valley Coal Company) reached out to the Pennsylvania State College, requesting permission to create an extension school in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. The purpose was to provide evening classes in practical subjects for "mechanics, electrical workers, draftsmen, shop foremen, firemen, and engineers."

Extension education aims to make educational opportunities available to students for whom educational opportunities have been traditionally restricted. In the 1910s, very few post-secondary educational options existed in the Wyoming Valley. The first advertisement for the "Pennsylvania State College Engineering Extension School," appeared in the Wilkes-Barre Times Leader in October 1916. By the end of that month, 100 students had registered for courses, held in the evenings, and by the start of classes at Coughlin High School on November 7, 1916, the school had hired eight instructors.

1920s
During the 1920s, the Wilkes-Barre Extension School continued to expand in order to meet the needs of the local community. Coal mining was an important part of the region's economy; by 1929 Pennsylvania boasted one-fifth of the nation's mineral wealth. And yet, there was a deficit of qualified engineers and other skilled laborers to work in the energy and related fields. The Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 provided federal funding to states for vocational education, and in 1920, the Wilkes-Barre Extension began a training program for industrial teachers, in order to increase capacity for technical education. From 1920 to 1930 the number of students involved in part-time extension or vocational instruction across Pennsylvania doubled, reaching close to 10,000, and the number of teachers almost tripled.
1930s
Great Depression Spurs Campus Expansion

With the advent of the Great Depression came the decline of the anthracite coal mining industry in Northeastern Pennsylvania. The number of shifts available to coal miners decreased, and one path to success was to try for promotion among the coal mines’ administrative ranks as a foreman or similar salaried position. The Wilkes-Barre Extension School adjusted its course offerings accordingly, partnering with the Bureau of Mines to teach topics covered on the state mining examinations. In 1936, the school officially changed its name to the Pennsylvania State College Wilkes-Barre Technical School Center.

World War II dominated the 1940s, and, once again responding to the needs of the community, the Wilkes-Barre Technical School Center created the second-largest man power training program in Pennsylvania. Courses important to the war effort, such as accounting, time and motion study, and auditing dominated the curriculum. In 1946, the name of the school changed to the Wyoming Valley Evening Technical Institute of the Pennsylvania State College, but one year later the success of the GI Bill led to an influx of new students and the school quickly added a companion "Wyoming Valley Day Technical Institute" to address the overcrowding. George W. Bierly became the administrative head of the day school in 1948. By the end of the decade, the school was offering its first diplomas for students completing a one-year course of study.

1950s
The 1950s started with a new home for the Wyoming Valley Technical Institutes. The school moved to the Guthrie High School building in downtown Wilkes-Barre and the name changed again - to the "Wilkes-Barre Center of the Pennsylvania State University." By 1953, the school began offering two-year Associate degree programs. Because of this, for the first time, the school began to offer courses in the Humanities to support the diverse needs of the degree programs. The Associate degree in Surveying started in 1957. Women students had always been a part of the school, albeit in low numbers. The field of engineering was especially hostile to women: in 1957 the Dean of the College of Engineering and Architecture at Penn State had published an article in the Penn State Engineer entitled "Engineering is not for Women." Despite this, in 1959, the first female to graduate from Wilkes-Barre Center with an Associate degree in Design Technology, Immaculata Comitz, was hired by the Troyler Corporation in Scranton as a project draftsman engineer, and became a key member of the team who helped design the first 6-car haul away trailer.

Image: Wilkes-Barre Center's graduating class of 1959, including Immaculata Comitz. Penn State Wilkes-Barre Campus Archives, Nesbitt Library.
1960s
A Place of Our Own

For the first fifty years of its existence, the Wilkes-Barre campus lived in rented space, utilizing high school buildings in downtown Wilkes-Barre. By the mid-1960s, things looked grim, as the lease on the space in the Guthrie building was ending. However, in 1964, a wealthy widow named Bertha Conyngham passed away, leaving her estate of Hayfield Farm in Lehman, Pennsylvania, 12 miles outside of Wilkes-Barre, to her nephew, Richard I. Robinson. Robinson, in turn, gifted the estate, valued at $1 million, to the Pennsylvania State University. For the next several years, the campus held several activities on the property, added a new classroom building (now called the Murphy Student Services Center) and worked to convert the Hayfield mansion and its 19-car garage into a modern campus setting. In 1968, the school held the first classes at the Lehman location.
1970s
Well-Rounded University

Campus continued to expand throughout the 1970s. In 1971 the campus was able to offer the opportunity to students to complete the first two years of more than 100 of the baccalaureate degree majors offered by Penn State. 1973 saw the completion of a new science classroom and laboratory building. The Surveying program and the Photogrammetry program were extremely prestigious and, in 1975, the campus added a Biomedical Equipment Technology program to the curriculum. The campus also extended its reach into the community, addressing a new audience - children. In 1977 the campus collaborated with other area colleges on a summer camp entitled "College for Kids." Students formed a variety of clubs on campus, including an International Association (activities included fondue parties and travel) and a Veterans Club. The students also released a regular newsletter entitled the Mushroom Chronicle, which featured "campus news, announcements, poetry, job opportunities, short stories, puzzles, and some cartoons." No known copies survive.

1980s
Student Engagement

At the start of the 1980s, enrollment on campus began to decline. In 1986, the Penn State Wilkes-Barre campus appointed a Study Group on Student Involvement to examine the level of students’ involvement in the educational, cultural, and social life of the campus and to make recommendations. Their findings revealed that the "average" student was a 19-20 year-old white male pursuing a technology/Engineering curriculum with only a minimal commitment to his education. While this average student thought that Penn State Wilkes-Barre was "doing a good job," he did not spend much time on campus outside of class, and did not have much interest in student clubs or athletics. The group made several recommendations aimed at making the campus a "challenging, lively, and exciting place!" They also addressed the need to attract more female students to campus. Over the next several years, the campus took many steps to provide student-centered and cultural activities to improve student involvement. The Nittany Commons, non-University-owned student housing, was built in 1985.

An Overview:

Our “average” student seems to be somewhat committed and involved in his education however, his level of involvement is minimal. It is interesting to note that he is maintaining a C+ to B+ average in his courses with probably less total time spent in school and on studying than he spent earning the same grades in high school. In fact, his profile could just as well have been a profile of a “typical” high school student. Except for more copious note-taking in class, just about the same “Strategies For Getting By” work as well in the ‘new’ college environment as it did in the ‘old’ high school environment. Is there good reason to believe that there will be changes in his “studenting” behavior patterns when, at least to his mind, there is no corresponding changes in the educational environment? If these changes are not self motivated and self initiated and if we would want to see changes in these behavior patterns then, perhaps, it must be initiated by us by changing the way we treat him. For example, by raising the level of what we expect from him both as a student and as a person a notch higher than anything in his previous experiences; or perhaps by setting higher standards for acceptable scholarship and sticking steadfastly to these standards. In short, we may be nurturing his lack of involvement through our failure to shift an equitable portion of responsibility for his education from our shoulders on to his shoulders. This shift must begin in the classroom. The classroom should be a place where both the hardwork and rewards of learning are “shared” but how can this occur when, very often, the only person prepared for class each day is the instructor!

This campus can not be an exciting, challenging and lively place for students until all our classrooms are! If we are to make any meaningful recommendations at all, the classroom must be the primary object. Everything else is merely cosmetic.

1990s
The Information Age

Technology dominated the 1990s in the world and on campus. The Bell Center for Technology and the Friedman Observatory opened in 1990. In 1994, the campus received approval for a four-year baccalaureate degree in Surveying. Penn State's first websites debuted in the 1990s, although these early "Web 1.0" sites were not interactive and primarily provided basic information about "Penn State's Northeast Regional Center for Engineering and Engineering Technology." In 1997, students contacting Admissions could request to have materials sent to them in paper, or on a Windows or Macintosh "diskette." The campus even began offering a few select classes online. Penn State Wilkes-Barre continued its role as a vibrant part of the community during the 1990s. The Student Government started its Haunted Forest Fund Raiser; Continuing Education continued to offer a wide range of programs, from sports camps for youth to technology courses, and the campus celebrated its 75th Anniversary.

2000s
The 21st century began with bursting of the dot.com bubble and the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, creating an atmosphere of anxiety and unease across the nation. Still, enrollment was on the rise and Penn State Wilkes-Barre continued to expand its four-year academic programs, adding bachelor of science degree programs in Business, Information Sciences and Technology, and Administration of Justice. Classroom space continued to grow with the completion of the Nesbitt Academic Commons in 2008, a modern LEED-certified Silver building containing classrooms and auditorium on the ground floor, and the Nesbitt Library on the second.

Looking Ahead

Penn State Wilkes-Barre continues to look ahead. In 2013, the campus opened the Struthers Career Services Center to help graduates transition successfully into the job market. We are the only Penn State campus and the only Pennsylvania institution to offer an accredited bachelor’s degree in Surveying Engineering. The campus continues to add programs - most recently a four-year degree in Rehabilitation and Human Services, and one in Corporate Communications. In 2015, the campus hosted its first Undergraduate Research Day (now the Celebration of Scholarship), highlighting research projects by students from all disciplines. Our continuing education programs are thriving, and include a wide range of offerings for individuals seeking to improve their professional skills, as well as summer youth camps, and personal interest programs that have an educational and cultural interest to the community. Penn State Wilkes-Barre is committed to being student-focused, promoting personal and intellectual diversity, providing lifelong learning opportunities, providing greater access to programs through technology and location, and responding to community needs academically, technologically, culturally, and economically. These goals have been with us all along, and our ability to anticipate the needs of our community and provide the resources that they need will propel us towards another 100 years.

Image: Penn State Wilkes-Barre senior, Ryan Oliver, presenting research poster on "LEGos in the Classroom," during the 2016 Celebration of Scholarship, 2016. Penn State Wilkes-Barre Campus Archives, Nesbitt Library.
Credits

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100 Years: Penn State Wilkes-Barre, 1916-2016
at
https://sites.psu.edu/psuwb100/