

ALERT TOP STORY

Sweet Briar College president reflects on tenure

Rodney Robinson

Jan 22, 2023

Sweet Briar College President Meredith Woo says it's time for her to pass the baton and let a new leader take charge.

“This college is perfectly poised for new leadership to take us to a greater height,” Woo said in a recent interview.

In a news release from Sweet Briar this month, Woo announced she will step down at the conclusion of the 2023-2024 academic year, after seven years of leadership. Woo started at Sweet Briar in 2017, two years after the college nearly closed.



Sweet Briar College President Meredith Woo will step down at the conclusion of the 2023-2024 academic year after seven years of leadership.

Justin Faulconer

Mason Rummel, current chair of Sweet Briar's board of directors and member of the board of directors since October 2015, said she didn't necessarily expect Woo's decision to step down but it wasn't “all that surprising.”

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She mentioned Woo will have been at the college longer than the average tenure of a liberal arts college president. According to a 2017 report from the American Council on Education, college presidents serve an average of 6.5 years.

Rummel said it's "really a gift that she's given us this much time" and it's bittersweet.

"You hate to lose a great leader, but I have such respect for her and her thinking, and how she came to the conclusion that this was the right thing to do, not just for her but for the college," Rummel said.



Sweet Briar College in Amherst County.

COURTESY OF SWEET BRIAR COLLEGE

Bettina Ring, chief sustainability and diversity officer for the Sustainable Forestry Initiative and former secretary of agriculture and forestry under Gov. Northam, said when the news was announced, she was momentarily sad but ultimately happy for Woo for what she has been able to accomplish in her time at the college.

Ring worked a number of years with the forest department and returned to Virginia in 2014 to serve as state forester. The Virginia Department of Forestry is a partner with the college and the department has worked with school officials in the past on reforestation and sustainable forest management work.

Although Ring is not with the department any longer, she said the relationship between the VDOP and the college will remain strong no matter the president, as there's a good relationship there.

She explained in an interview that Woo recognized the importance of natural resources and the assets Sweet Briar had on campus, and she used those for learning. Ring said she is fortunate to have had the opportunity to cross paths with her.

"I learned a great deal from her, as so many other women," Ring said.



The Sweet Briar College campus in Amherst.

File photo courtesy of Sweet Briar College

Under Woo, Sweet Briar overhauled the college's curriculum to emphasize female leadership, underwent a tuition price reset, increase in enrollment since 2017, and the budget and landscape was restructured, according to a release.

In an interview with The News & Advance, Woo said the most noticeable change was in academics, as the college focused more on leadership, experiential education, engineering and sustainability with an emphasis on agriculture.

She said the college changed the curriculum with an eye to where Sweet Briar needs to be 20 and 30 years from now to meet the needs of the time, such as changes in higher education and preparing women for the types of potential jobs in the future.

“We will always continuously refine and revise ourselves to meet the needs of the time, but at the same time we kind of realize that there are big changes happening in higher education, and we try to be as proactive and as ready for the changes,” Woo said.

Woo said the other thing that became an emphasis was the responsibility “we have for our campus.”

The college has built nearly 20 acres of vineyards and has invested in a 26,000-square-foot greenhouse where students produce greens and other vegetables, along with a new turf field and facilities in their equestrian program.

For all those reasons, coupled with increasing enrollment numbers, continued support of alumnae and overall growth of Sweet Briar, Woo thinks it’s time for a new leader at the private women’s college in Amherst County.

Woo started her tenure in May 2017, just after the end of the academic year. That fall, the total number of degree-seeking undergraduates seeking a bachelor’s degree from the college was 281, according to the Office of Institutional Effectiveness at Sweet Briar. That number increased to 451 students in fall 2022, a 60% increase.

In the years preceding the 2015 closure attempt, the total number of degree-seeking undergraduate hovered close to 600 – 610 in 2011; 566 in 2012; 599 in 2013 and 561 in 2014. In fall 2015, just after Sweet Briar averted the closure threat, the total number of degree-seeking undergraduates was 236.

Woo said the increase in enrollment in the past six years has been important.

“Not only numerically did we grow, but also the kinds of students that are coming to Sweet Briar are students who are a really good fit and who can truly benefit from the kind of education we provide,” Woo said.

The president explained in an interview she feels she has completed all work and goals she set out to complete six years ago and because of that, the college is poised for its next leader.

“I don’t think that we even imagined that we would be able to accomplish so much, but we did and I’m really grateful to the community at Sweet Briar College for making it happen,” Woo said.

Over the next 18 months, the board of directors will work with the campus community to recruit its next president.

Rummel said she can’t say how long it will take, but she is in the process of forming a search committee, which is about 90% complete.

The board has identified several search firms that have submitted proposals as the vetting of them will occur over the next few weeks.

“I tell you, we won’t settle. We will make sure that we get the right person, there’s some big shoes to fill here,” Rummel said.

During Woo’s tenure, Rummel said she has inspired the Sweet Briar community of alumnae and change makers.

The chair of the board of directors said if you take a look at what she has done with this college since she took over, such as the revamping of the curriculum, it’s all “very forward thinking.”

“It’s not just your typical standard, you know, high academic standards, but it’s really thinking about the future and the leaders that they’re creating and nurturing at the school,” Rummel said.

Joshua Harris, assistant professor of music performing arts, sees it the same way.

“She inspired us to think outside the box, to come up with new and innovative ways of teaching. There’s just been a lot of energy and a lot of momentum thanks to her leadership,” Harris said.

Woo said she is focused on Sweet Briar for now and not what’s next for her personally after her tenure.

“One of the things that we always say at Sweet Briar is, ‘Onward,’” Woo said.



Correction

Bettina Ring is chief sustainability and diversity officer for the Sustainable Forestry Initiative. Her last name was incorrect in an earlier version of this article.

By Rodney Robinson

TOP STORY

CVCC continues efforts to add skilled workers during labor shortages

Rodney Robinson

Mar 31, 2023



In this July 30, 2020 file photo, banners hang in the quad at Central Virginia Community College in Lynchburg. The News & Advance file

Rodney Robinson

There's a growing need for skilled workers in manufacturing and technology fields across the United States, and Central Virginia Community College in Lynchburg has taken notice.

With the help of grants and local business alliances, the college is working to address these shortages to get students working.

Manufacturing accounts for 13.7% of the Lynchburg-area workforce, with 11,377 people employed in that sector as of the second quarter of 2022. It's the second largest employment sector in the area behind health care, according to Virginia Career Works, a group that helps individuals find jobs in Central Virginia.

“Having people trained correctly for these new jobs, this new environment, is key to America keeping up, much less Virginia,” said Marcella Gale, mechatronics faculty member and program head at the college.

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Mechatronics refers to the blend of mechanical, electric, electronic and computer engineering disciplines used in automated manufacturing, smart technologies and other advanced industries.

“We're on the cusp of needing a boost in productivity in order to keep our standard of living and keep our economy going,” Gale said. “So that's what we're trying to do here, is to supply the skilled technical workforce needed for this new environment.”

Danny Murphy, a mechatronics professor, said the technology industry is “starving for qualified help and that affects all of us.”

“It’s the food that we eat. It’s the products that we buy and they don’t have enough qualified people to run the machines or keep the machines running,” Murphy said.

The college recently hosted Zach Oxendine, an engineering technical program manager at Microsoft, who visited to share his experience with students.

He discussed the possibilities of getting a two-year degree and becoming an engineer, and the importance of companies working with community colleges — something Murphy and Gale echoed.

Jason Ferguson, CVCC’s associate vice president of professional and career studies at the college, said each program within the college has advisory committees made up of different business representatives and subject matter experts, and they meet at least annually.

“We’re definitely engaged with the local businesses and see a lot of support,” Ferguson said.

CVCC received a three-year National Science Foundation (NSF) grant last year, which allowed them to purchase three FANUC automated manufacturing robots, add new adjunct professors and courses.

The college held a kickoff meeting in September. Between 40 and 50 people met to discuss the causes of labor shortages in the manufacturing industry and the different things CVCC is trying to do to help alleviate it.

Since that time and the implementation of the new grant, four new adjunct professors were brought on board with possibly two more arriving in the future.

CVCC, with the help of the new grant, also added and revamped three new career pathways: nuclear technician general track, mechatronics academic pathway, and computer and electronic technology computer networking.

Murphy said classes taught within those pathways, such as programmable logic controller programming and robotics, are a direct result of the NSF grants received.

Gale said the college plans to apply for more grant funding.

Separate from the grant, the college has dual enrollment opportunities for high school students, which includes the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) Academy and CTE (Career and Technical Education) Academy where students can earn college credits to get started in technology or manufacturing fields.

CVCC President John Capps said the CTE Academy began last year with the support of a \$400,000 state grant, and it receives support from business partners such as the nuclear-services firm Framatome, the HVAC firm Southern Air, and Centra Health.

Capps said that since the academy's inception, enrollment in the CTE curriculum has increased 52%.

The STEM Academy started in 2015 and has graduated 196 students with 451 credentials. Students in the STEM Academy completed 11,760 internship hours at 26 local companies and 67% of those students are now working full time in STEM careers in Central Virginia, according to Capps.

“Employers have come to us and we’ve gone to employers. Higher education has been superimposed on workforce development ... We’re really accomplishing both goals at the same time. We’re educating students at the same time that we’re preparing them for employment,” Capps said.

By Rodney Robinson

https://newsadvance.com/news/local/education/an-urban-food-forest-comes-to-r-s-payne-elementary-school-with-help-of-heat/article_6c1db2e6-deeb-11ed-b6d8-47d540a990df.html

ALERT TOP STORY

Robert S. Payne Elementary School

An urban food forest comes to R.S. Payne Elementary School with help of heat-mapping data

Rodney Robinson

Apr 22, 2023



Students and staff broke ground on an urban forest at Robert S. Payne Elementary School on Wednesday.
Rodney Robinson Jr. photos, The News & Advance

Rodney Robinson



Once an idea during summer research, students, staff and representatives — from Lynchburg City Schools, the City of Lynchburg, Randolph College, the University of Lynchburg and the Virginia Department of Forestry — broke ground on an urban forest at Robert S. Payne Elementary School on Wednesday morning.

Students helped plant the garden's first fruit trees and shrubs in the field behind the school, next to its playground.

Eva Pontius, a senior at Randolph College studying environmental science who used software to design the food forest, said altogether, there's about 50 trees and shrubs with fruits such as elderberries and apples.

The food forest is designed to combat rising heat, as well as eliminate food deserts within the city.

Pontius said her summer research group began looking for a location to install the garden and the Diamond Hill area was identified.

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The group narrowed down locations around the city **using data** collected from the **heat-mapping project two years ago**.

She explained the community is in a food desert — generally defined as areas where residents have limited access to affordable, nutritious food — and the group wanted to help increase access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

Pontius said Reid Wodicka — deputy superintendent of operations and strategic planning at Lynchburg City Schools — mentioned there was interest in R.S. Payne Elementary School having a food forest installed.

Wodicka said in an interview the collaboration between the colleges and Pontius, in regard to the planting, started about six months ago.

“We see a vision of using our public spaces as an opportunity to connect with the community that we serve,” Wodicka said. “It was an opportunity for the space to be better utilized by the school and by the neighborhood, certainly in respect to the planting day here but also long in the future.”

Following the interest, Pontius began working with the Lynchburg City Schools staff, the school, grounds and facility staff to organize materials and start designing the garden.

With the help of grants, she ordered the plants and designed the garden using software.

A grant from the Virginia Department of Forestry, up to \$15,000, and a Randolph Innovative Student Experience Grant (RISE) which students at the college can apply for up to \$2,000, helped with the purchase of the plants and other materials.

She focused on “edible perennials, to make it lower maintenance.”

Pontius said she also wrote her senior thesis on food forests, looking at its benefits and challenges, describing it as a “niche thing” that she found “very significant community benefits” in.

“It creates a space for people to come and be outside, and engage in healthy activities like gardening and exercising,” Pontius said. “We just wanted to create a place that both the children at the school can use during their recess and their gym classes, that will have different learning opportunities as well as a space for the community to use on the weekends or off school hours.”

Nearly two years ago, students and faculty at Sweet Briar College, University of Lynchburg and Randolph College participated in a heat-mapping project to collect temperatures and analyze the heat risks around the city.

The three colleges were among more than a dozen institutions in the Virginia Foundation of Independent Colleges who participated in the study.

Laura Henry-Stone, associate professor of environmental sciences and sustainability who worked closely with the heat-mapping project, said the planting day has been really exciting.

She said planting the forest garden at R.S. Payne is “really a unique project” and it’s “really gratifying” to see the “permaculture vision that I think has real potential for transforming the way that we grow food for communities.”

“This was the pilot project to demonstrate one approach to adapting to the heat that this neighborhood, in particular, experiences. Planting fruiting trees is just a really fun way to bring together all these different objectives,” Henry-Stone said.

Karin Warren, Herzog family professor of environmental studies at Randolph College, worked closely with Pontius and her group during their summer research and planning. She also worked closely with the heat-mapping project.

Warren said it was a collaborative effort and many people helped along the way — Lynchburg City Schools, Department of Forestry, VFIC, University of Lynchburg, Sweet Briar College, Randolph College students and more.

“What we’re seeking to do is have this be an example that other schools and community centers can come and look and see if this is something they’d like in their community, and our goal would be to try and help look for funding opportunities so that we can bring funds in to help parts of our community do this, who would like to do something similar,” Warren said.

By Rodney Robinson
