

# *Case Study of Graduate/Online Program Growth Wilkes University*

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## Introduction

A key tenet in our book, *Transforming for Turbulent Times*, is that colleges and universities must develop new offerings to serve existing and new markets. They must do this to compensate for the anticipated decline in demand in their traditional markets and to develop the capacity to serve new, promising markets in the emerging learning/work ecosystem.

This case focuses on the ongoing development of the latter capacity at Wilkes University over a nearly 50-year period. It describes the chronology of programs developed and reviews lessons learned from this experience. While much of this development occurred in less turbulent times, the challenges the University encountered are still instructive for institutions embarking on service to new markets.

Wilkes University, a small independent institution, is located in Wilkes Barre, PA in the northeastern part of the state. Its 2021-22 FTE enrollments were 2095 undergraduate and 1484 graduate learners. From its founding in 1933, the University has had a tradition of public service to its service area. In addition to the non-residential graduate and online programs, which are the focus of this case, Wilkes offers a robust undergraduate program and operates a Pharmacy School. We will describe the graduate and online programs in greater detail in succeeding sections.

Since the beginning of the millennium, a focal point of the university's strategic plans has been to responsibly, and in concert with its mission, grow graduate and online programs in non-traditional areas to address emerging educational needs and bolster the University's enrollments and financial position.

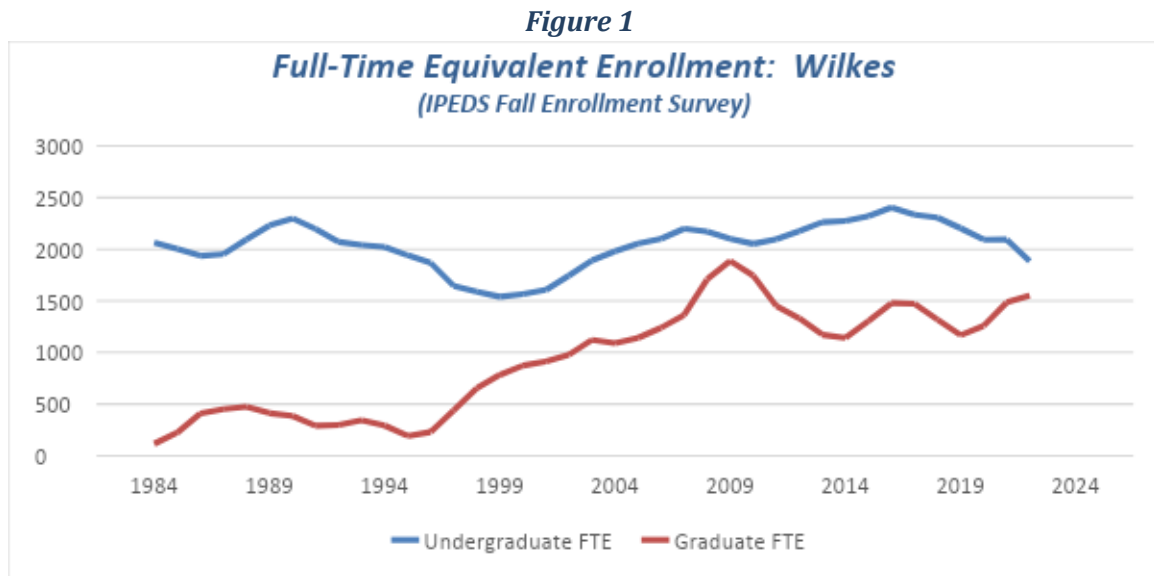


## A Chronology of Graduate Programs at Wilkes University

We have divided this chronology into three periods, identified by the prevailing leadership mindsets in each. These periods/mindsets are:

- 1984 to 2002—Entrepreneurial I
- 2002 to 2012—Strategic Growth
- 2012 to present—Entrepreneurial II

Figure 1 shows full-time equivalent undergraduate and graduate enrollments at Wilkes through all three periods. It reveals a program overall that has grown significantly since 1984, but has also faced headwinds at several points in time.



### ***Entrepreneurial I***

In 1984, under the leadership of a highly entrepreneurial chair of its education faculty, Wilkes was awarded Information Technology Education for the Commonwealth (ITEC) funding to provide training for K-12 teachers in Northeastern Pennsylvania. In 1992, based on its exceptional performance, Wilkes received a \$2,000,000 grant to continue that work, but with a mandate to establish the Teacher Education Center (TEC) to deliver professional education for teachers in the region and administer all ITEC university centers in the state. The TEC coordinated the design of microcomputer courses and workshops for Pennsylvania's K-12 teachers, trained instructors for ITEC courses, scheduled courses at 14 ITEC centers, and evaluated course and instructor effectiveness.

In 1999, administrative responsibility for all of Wilkes' graduate programs in education was assigned to the TEC, with the founding faculty member serving as director. The programs included:

- Educational Development and Strategies

- Educational Leadership
- Secondary Education

In 2000, increased K-12 teacher demand for classroom technology and educational “best practices” courses led to the development of a graduate program in consultation with school district superintendents and Intermediate Unit directors in Northeastern Pennsylvania. This collaboration with the school districts led to the creation of a master’s degree in instructional technology with an associated certificate. This curriculum was approved by the Pennsylvania Department of Education and was made a requirement for individuals to teach technology-based courses in all Pennsylvania public schools.

Also, in the 1990’s, the University expanded its off campus graduate teacher education offerings in partnership with Performance Learning Systems (PLS), a provider of high-quality graduate teacher education curricula. By 2001 Wilkes operated nearly 50 regional sites and became the dominant provider of graduate teacher education in Eastern Pennsylvania. Courses were offered directly in school district buildings and at competitive tuition rates provided on favorable payment terms. The significant credit hour increases between 1999 and 2001 can be attributed to this Wilkes/PLS partnership.

Between 1984 to 2001 over \$20m in grants were raised for graduate education.

### *Strategic Growth through Partnerships*

Under the leadership of a new President (one of the coauthors of this case) in 2001, an ambitious 2010 Strategic Plan was developed. The plan anticipated a decline in the number of high school graduates in the region served by Wilkes University and the need to develop new capabilities to serve new, promising markets in the emerging learning/work ecosystem.

With the retirement of the entrepreneurial leader, administrative responsibility for the graduate education program changed hands at the end of the 2001-2002 academic year. The new Director, who served from 2002 to 2004, had a traditional academic mindset. During this period there was some extension of regional sites and the addition of a master’s program in special education. All of the programs offered continued to generate significant revenue for the University. In 2003, Wilkes graduate education programs grew to include:

- Classroom Technology
- Educational Development and Strategies
- Educational Leadership
- Instructional Technology
- Special Education

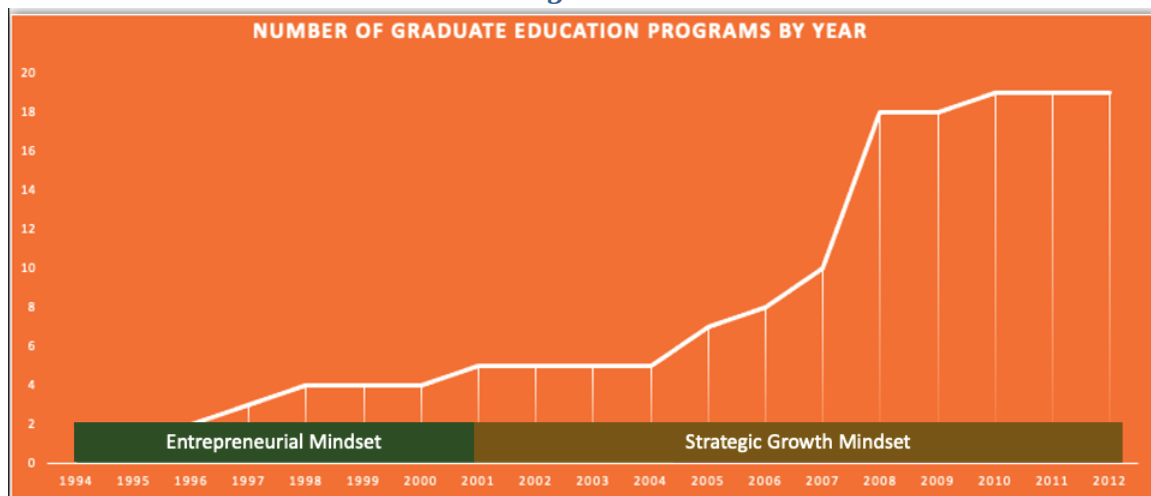
While graduate FTE enrollments grew by 19 percent during this period, this growth failed to meet the stretch targets for graduate education set in the 2010 Strategic Plan. Those targets called for these enrollments to comprise one third of total University FTE enrollments by 2010. In 2004, a new Director (one of the coauthors of this case) was hired who had a strategic growth mindset and the ambition to achieve the enrollment growth goals set for graduate/online programs in the 2010 Plan.

**Teacher Education Programs.** The new Director’s approach for building teacher education programs was to closely monitor school and teacher accountability requirements under

federal laws such as No Child Left Behind, changes in certification requirements by departments of education, the need for highly qualified leaders in the educational field, and rapid advances in technology. This approach led to the development of several programs that were responsive to needs in each of these areas. From 2004 to 2009, 11 masters' programs and a doctoral program with three tracks—all in education and which are listed below—were added. By 2009, graduate education comprised 47% of total University FTE enrollments, exceeding the 2010 strategic plan enrollment goal. These programs—with the number developed each year portrayed in Figure 2—included:

- Classroom Technology
- Educational Development & Strategies
- Educational Leadership
- Instructional Technology
- Special Education
- Early Childhood Literacy
- School Business Leadership – partnership with the Pennsylvania Association of School Business Officials
- 21st Century Teaching and Learning – with Learning Sciences International
- Letter of Endorsement in Teacher Leadership and Instructional Coaching – LSI
- Instructional Media – a partnership with Discovery Education
- Instructional Media with STEM Endorsement – Discovery Education
- The Art and Science of Teaching - LSI
- International School Leadership
- Master's in Reading Specialist with certification – LSI partnership
- Online Teaching with Online Instruction Endorsement
- Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages with ESL Program Specialist Certification
- Doctoral Degree in Education - Higher Education, Educational Technology and School Leadership.

*Figure 2*



Much of the success and rapid development of the Graduate Program in Education between 2008-12 can be attributed to strategic alliances and partnerships with external partners. The first partnership was established in the 1980s with Performance Learning Systems

(PLS) to offer a master's degree in Educational Development and Strategies. This has historically been one of the most popular degrees at Wilkes.

Starting in 2005, Wilkes established several critical partnerships with:

- Learning Sciences International,
- Pennsylvania Association for School Business Officials (PASBO),
- The California Association for School Business Officials (CASBO),
- Discovery Education, and the
- New York Times.

Each of these partners provided high-quality materials and resources that were used in Wilkes courses and, in some cases, helped to promote them through marketing to their users and constituent members.

In 2005, the directorship of graduate education was expanded to include other graduate programs at the University. The only program not brought under this umbrella was the MBA. One of the programs added to the portfolio was the master's degree in Creative Writing. It continues as a successful, low-residency program delivered primarily online. It was the first authorized online program at the University.

In this period, the impact of the Internet was starting to be felt in higher education and many schools were moving courses online. Wilkes University recognized the opportunity and secured approvals to begin offering its classroom technology program online. This approval from the Middle States accreditation body paved the way for additional online programs to be added without prior approval. It also provided valuable experience for the University in large-scale online education and led to the development of an important core University competency in this rapidly emerging area.

The Great Recession of 2007-9 led to a significant reduction in state appropriations to K-12 public education. One of the first expenditures to be cut by school systems was tuition reimbursement for graduate teacher education courses and salary incentives for taking them. Wilkes was hard hit by these reductions and powerless to reverse them. These circumstances illustrate a characteristic of these new markets—they are less stable than those higher education has traditionally served. Thus, the programs developed for these more turbulent markets must have the agility and resilience necessary to accommodate rapid market change—up or down. It should be noted that Wilkes' teacher education programs did have resilience in that they were taught primarily by adjunct faculty who were senior educators and school administrators who understood the reason for program contraction and were not dependent on the income they received for teaching in the program.

**International Graduate Education Programs.** Recognizing that the pool of education graduate students in the U.S (especially in its principal service area in Northeastern Pennsylvania) was diminishing, the leadership of the Wilkes School of Education sought to expand into international graduate education. Utilizing alliances with existing partners, the University set up master's programs in Europe and the Middle East. It also established the first of its kind, onsite doctoral program at the ABA International School in Muscat, Oman. Active participation in several international associations for education helped to establish the education program and led to the development of international leadership masters and

doctoral programs in conjunction with the Association for the Advancement of International Education. The relationships developed during this time period laid the foundation for increased enrollments that helped compensate for enrollment declines in the US.

**The Mesa Branch Campus.** In part to compensate for the loss of enrollments in graduate teacher education, in 2012, Wilkes University successfully responded to an RFP from the City of Mesa, Arizona, and was selected to become one of five schools to offer higher education programs in facilities provided by the City. City planners believed that the development of the Downtown would be enhanced by the presence of higher education programs offered by independent institutions, adding diversity to the offerings of two excellent public institutions in the region—Arizona State University and Maricopa Community College’s Mesa Campus. Wilkes initially offered the Master of Business Administration degree and the Bachelor’s degree in business for transfer students. Later it added master’s degrees in engineering management, creative writing, education and a doctor of education program.

Although all parties participating in the Mesa Center for Higher Education operated with the best of intentions, only one of the five institutions selected is still operating there. The central problems encountered were insufficient commitment and investment by the participating institutions and the City of Mesa’s inability to deliver on its commitment to promote the institutions. All participants except one – the one still thriving - were neophytes when they entered into this project and came out much the wiser as a result of their participation in the project.

In 2012-13 the University leadership changed at multiple levels and the University’s strategic commitment to off-campus programs and external partnerships weakened. Education enrollments decreased significantly and the partnerships in that area languished. In one case, campus-based faculty decided that they no longer needed an external partner to help deliver a particular program and cut ties with the partner. Without the participation of the partner, the program quickly faltered and a once successful program area and associated revenue were lost. The Mesa Campus was abandoned in 2017. This series of events serves to illustrate that the successful operation of new programs and markets across the institution requires a strong and sustained strategic commitment at all levels.

### ***Entrepreneurial II***

The OPM Provider HotChalk approached the University in 2013 to see if it would be interested in working with them to deliver Wilkes’ graduate nursing, doctor of education, and MBA programs online. HotChalk was particularly interested in Wilkes because of its record of offering online programs in partnership with other organizations and because of the strength of its nursing program. The University already had in place an online nurse practitioner program.

At the outset of the partnership, it was decided to develop non-clinical concentrations in nursing education and nursing executive leadership first. As enrollment increased in these areas, the partnership assumed responsibility for the delivery the Doctor of Nursing Practice program. In addition, the School of Nursing worked with HotChalk to launch a new nursing informatics concentration, an RN-BSN completion program, as well as the university’s first Ph.D. in nursing education.

The HotChalk partnership got off to a good start in nursing, due to the entrepreneurial leadership of a new Wilkes nursing dean. The rise in enrollments, shown in Figure 1 in 2016-18, can be traced to this success. However, the lack of experience with this type of partnership precipitated several areas of stress.

For the University, the areas of stress were: The HotChalk delivery model included eight-week courses that ran three terms a year. This schedule did not fit the standard academic semester calendar and stressed the University financial aid, registrar and bursar units. Wilkes' online learning office was overwhelmed with the volume of classes that needed to be created. The person in charge of state-by-state authorization was also inundated with requests to ramp up approvals across the country – a process that is not a simple or short one. And lastly, the need for faculty to offer an increasing number of sections put a strain on the system. In short, the University had a capacity issue.

For its part, HotChalk also ran into challenges. Corporate ownership changed hands and the new owners strayed from the original corporate commitment. Marketing costs came in higher than projected and the company was unable to generate sufficient income to cover the cost of the Wilkes offerings. HotChalk had also anticipated offering the University's doctor of education and MBA degrees, but this did not happen. Finally, the Wilkes nursing program leadership decided that it could not partner with HotChalk on the nursing practitioner programs because HotChalk did not have a track record on managing clinical placement for these nursing students. As a result of the substantial challenges facing both partners, the University and HotChalk dissolved the partnership.

In 2020, a new OPM provider, Keypath, approached the Wilkes nursing program about offering a suite of nursing majors. Keypath specialized in clinical placements, which made them especially appealing to the Wilkes College of Nursing. (Recruitment of clinical preceptors is one of the largest challenges for online graduate nursing programs across the United States.) Working with an OPM experienced in clinical placement would go a long way to addressing this challenge and enable scaling of the programs. Keypath also delivered its curriculum within the standard semester calendar.

The suite of nursing majors in the Wilkes online program now includes RN to MSN, Accelerated Bachelor of Science in Nursing, Master of Science in Nursing—Nurse Practitioner, Post Graduate/APRN Certificate, Doctor of Nursing Practice, and the PhD in Nursing.

This program has exceeded expectations and growth is now only limited by Keypath's ability to identify nurses in other regions to oversee internships. The program produced substantial new enrollments (See Figure 1) and revenue for the University in 2021 and 22 and helped turn a projected institutional budget deficit into a surplus.

But even in this salutary relationship, there are continuing issues of communication and allocation of responsibility that need to be addressed. The good thing is that, so far, the desire to make improvements and maintain goodwill are there on both sides to make the relationship work. But, as in most endeavors, collaboration is hard work and requires give and take, all in good spirit. There is a sense that this spirit exists and will persist.



## Conclusions

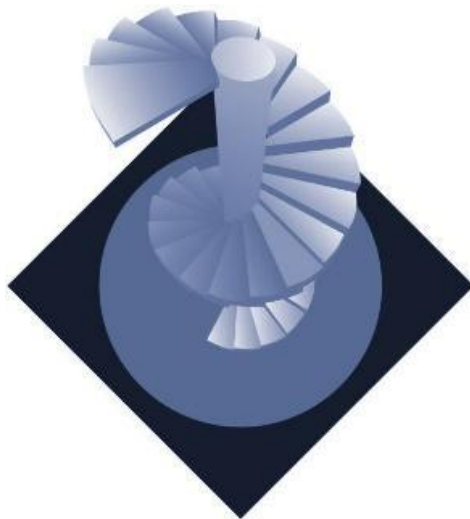
In this section, we offer conclusions based on Wilkes University's nearly 50 years of experience in developing graduate/online programs to serve existing and new markets. These conclusions are summarized for a number of key variables for each era in Table 1 on the next page. In addition to these conclusions, the following overarching thoughts are offered.

- Wilkes' experience, particularly in the last two decades, suggests that institutions attempting to move into new markets must be prepared for rapid cycles of program growth and decline as learner needs change rapidly in the much more turbulent world of today. One example from this study was the complete withdrawal of state support for teacher continuing education in Pennsylvania in 2009.
- In the face of this turbulence, programs will need to be designed for resilience so they can be collapsed or built rapidly. They will also have to be offered at a lower, more competitive cost.
- Most of these new programs will have to be designed to incorporate the learners' workplace training needs as the integration of knowledge, work and learning increases. Since Wilkes' entry into the graduate/online market, this design consideration has driven program development and has been a decisive competitive advantage.
- Partnerships will become a key element in successful higher education program development and delivery going forward. From the Wilkes experience, it is clear they demand considerable administrative and coordination effort, but they provide the benefit of capabilities most institutions need but cannot afford to mount on their own. In addition, as partnerships increase, institutions will need personnel with greater expertise in negotiating and administering contracts.
- Leadership for the development of these programs can come from all levels of the organization. That said, organization-wide transformation requires institutional enrollment goals and orchestrated, sustained support from all levels.
- Faculty resistance to the operation of graduate/online programs at Wilkes has been restrained throughout the timeframe of this case study. The reasons for this include that most of the programs operated outside of the core on-campus programs, that



faculty leaders understood that the programs generated significant additional revenue for the institution, and, in cases where they did participate, provided them opportunities that might not otherwise have been available. Nevertheless, there has always been tension underneath the surface that these programs were somehow “less” than the traditional programs and, in recent years, a desire by faculty to take over programs that were successful and garner a greater share of the revenue for themselves. Institutional leaders will need the strength to ensure that take overs don’t result in program failure as noted with regard to an educational partnership above.

- Looking ahead to 2030, the basic faculty role can be expected to change: it likely will be differentiated into more focused roles like curriculum design, course delivery, and student assessment. As practiced by some institutions, this differentiation has led to lower costs, faster program development and adaptation, and higher quality curricula. While faculty will continue to share in curriculum leadership, it will be imperative that they become more attuned to and willing to take part in addressing the imperatives of today’s higher education market.
- Leaders entering higher education today must set priorities, make investments, and take major risks. When programs fail, they will need to be able to shut them down quickly.
- Institutions that have experience in serving new markets with new approaches are much more likely to be successful than those that have lagged behind. Wilkes’ early entry into serving new markets and leveraging information technology provided a leg up in mounting innovative programs for new markets.
- OPMs have proven to be a useful vehicle for institutions that seek to move with dispatch into new markets. But the Biden Administration recently issued draft guidance on the regulation of “third party servicers,” with the primary objective of increasing oversight of OPMs. What form this regulation will ultimately take is unclear as many involved with OPMs are pushing back.



**Table 1: Case Study Conclusions**  
**Wilkes University: Graduate Program Development—1984 to present**

Key Factors	<i><b>Entrepreneurial I 1984-2002</b></i>	<i><b>Strategic Growth 2002-2012</b></i>	<i><b>Entrepreneurial II 2012-2023</b></i>
<b>Leadership Mindset</b>	Leadership came from the education chair, who understood the K-12 sector’s teacher development needs and was highly entrepreneurial and innovative.	First leader elevated in hierarchy to report to Provost, but had a traditional academic mindset and was unable to meet ambitious 2010 Strategic Plan Goals. He was replaced by a second leader with a strong growth mindset.	Leadership moved to entrepreneurial Dean of Nursing. Goal set was to establish a national Wilkes’ footprint in online Nursing education.
<b>Enrollment Growth</b>	Enrollments in graduate education accelerated in 1996 as Wilkes offered 4 unique, accessible and affordable graduate programs in Eastern PA.	Under the first leader graduate/online enrollments grew by 19%, but were not on track to reach the stretch goal of 33% of University enrollments by 2010. With the second leader, by 2009, graduate education comprised 47% of total University FTE enrollments, exceeding the 2010 strategic plan goal.	Bimodal growth between 2014 and 2022 reflects initiatives with two IPM partners.
<b>Program Growth</b>	Wilkes masters of education offerings were expanded to over 50 remote locations in partnership with Performance Learning Systems.	Under the first leader, Masters in Special Education was added. Under the second leader, from 2004 to 2009 11 masters’ and one doctoral program with three tracks—all in education—were added.	Both online nursing initiatives yielded significant growth. The current effort could lead to graduate/online enrollments approaching the 2009 levels.
<b>Role of Partnerships</b>	The Wilkes/Performance Learning Systems (PLS) partnership enabled Wilkes to offer a suite of high-quality programs that exceeded Wilkes capabilities and were popular.	Under the first leader the partnership with PLS was maintained. Under the second, the partnership with PLS was expanded and new partnerships were formed with Learning Sciences International, Discovery Education, the Pennsylvania Association of School Business Officers and the New York Times.	Two OPMs—HotChalk and Keypath—worked with the Wilkes Nursing program. The HotChalk partnership failed for lack of qualified faculty and inexperience on both sides. Keypath brought experience and faculty recruiting capacity.
<b>External Forces</b>	A key factor in Wilkes’ success was that regional university faculty were unionized, placing constraints on pay and work hours, making it difficult for them to offer courses at convenient times and places.	No change under the first leader. Under the second, in 2009, Pennsylvania significantly reduced appropriations to K-12 Education; school districts eliminated support and incentives for teachers to participate in grad education.	Cutting both ways, the shortage of nurses in the Nation’s healthcare systems has led to significant demand for online nursing education and a shortage of qualified faculty.
<b>Institutional Commitment and Support Systems</b>	Support, particularly from the business office, was lacking. The director raised over \$20m in grants from 1984 to 2001 to support programs.	With the first leader, the University strategic plan included stretch goals for off-campus/online programs; provided for greater support from the University. Under the second, University administrative support increased and improved, leading to better customer service for graduate education students.	Both OPM partners have posed collaboration and systems integration problems; Keypath brought greater experience.