

A Brief History of Lyon College

Founded in 1872, Lyon College (then Arkansas College) is the oldest college in Arkansas. Originally located on the “downtown” block the First Presbyterian Church of Batesville now occupies, the College remained under the leadership of the Long family for much of its first four decades. The Reverend Isaac J. Long served as president from the College’s founding until his death in 1891, and his son, Eugene R. Long, served two terms as president from 1891 to 1895 and 1897 to 1913.

From its beginning, the College was co-educational and remained dedicated to a classical course of study into the early 20th century. The College expanded after World War I when administrators purchased land in the East End Heights section of town, later known as the middle campus. The boom years of the 1920s faded quickly, however, as the Arkansas economy sank into depression. By the early 1930s, the very survival of the College was in jeopardy. Through the untiring efforts of a group of Batesville supporters and alumni and the generosity of Arkansas Presbyterian families, the College recovered in time to participate in the post-World War II G.I. boom that filled the nation’s classrooms.

In 1952, Dr. Paul M. McCain succeeded the Reverend John D. Spragins as president of the College. McCain’s 17-year tenure as president saw steady progress including the move to the current campus in 1954; accreditation by the North Central Association (NCA) in 1959; physical expansion during the 1960s; and the geographic and ethnic diversification of the student body.

During the 1970s and 1980s, President Dan C. West oversaw the implementation of significant curricular reforms, the introduction of innovative fundraising techniques, and the development of the Scottish Heritage Program. A bequest in 1981 of more than \$14 million by Miss Jean Brown of Hot Springs launched a drive that paved the way for a significant expansion of scholarship support for students and endowed faculty positions. In early 1980, the College also established a study-travel program that eventually grew to become the distinctive Nichols International Studies Program. A donation by Shuford Nichols, a trustee, and his wife, Laura, endowed the program.

In the 1990s, President John V. Griffith led a strategic planning process that placed the College on the path to distinction as a national liberal arts institution. During Griffith’s tenure, the College changed its curriculum and built or expanded several buildings, including the Holloway Theatre (1991); the Lyon Business and Economics Building (1993); the president’s residence, Bradley Manor (1994); and the upper division residence hall, Young House (1993). In 1994, it adopted the name Lyon College to honor a family that had served it with distinction for more than half a century. The College also created the state’s only student-run honor system in 1994.

The regular recognition that has come to Lyon’s faculty exemplified the College’s growing regional and national reputation. Since 1989, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Council for the Support and Advancement of Education have recognized 14 members of the Lyon faculty as Arkansas Professors of the Year.

Dr. Walter Roettger became the 16th president of Lyon in 1998 and continued the transformation that his predecessor had put into motion. The Derby Center for Science and Mathematics opened in 2003 and the Kelley Baseball Complex opened in 2004.

In 2009, Dr. Donald Weatherman, a former Lyon professor of political philosophy, became the 17th president of Lyon. That fall, Lyon launched the Lyon Education and Adventure Program (LEAP), an outdoor program that takes advantage of the College’s location in the Ozark foothills and its close proximity to rivers, lakes, caves, and other natural attractions.

On October 26, 2010, a fire destroyed Edwards Commons, which included the dining hall, student center, and student life offices. A new campus center, also named Edwards Commons, opened in August 2012. In the fall of 2012, the College began an assessment and proletarianization of all academic and administrative programs, a process designed to position the College for sustainability and growth. The French major was added to the curriculum. In 2013, the Board of Trustees approved the reinstatement of the football program, with fall 2015 marking the beginning of the competition. Men’s and women’s wrestling was also introduced, followed by cross-country, marching band, and Symphonic Winds.

Dr. W. Joseph King succeeded Weatherman as the 18th president of Lyon College in 2017.

Under his leadership, the ROTC military science concentration and the exercise science major and minor were approved in spring 2019. A new data science degree followed in April 2020. Dr. King also played a key role in making Lyon the first and only pet-friendly campus in the state.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, the College had to make the unprecedented transition to remote instruction for the remainder of the spring semester and the following fall semester. The College gradually brought students back to campus in the spring of 2021, developing new policies, organizing COVID testing schedules, and arranging vaccine clinics to ensure a safe learning environment.

Dr. Melissa Taverner succeeded King as the 19th president of Lyon College in 2022. Taverner has overseen the initial steps of a transition to NCAA Division III for Lyon College Athletics, a move that embraces the College's dedication to academics and will allow the College to compete against other selective colleges with similar academic expectations. Additionally, she has been instrumental in organizing a partnership with the White River Medical Center and White River Health System (WRHS) on a proposed RN to BSN nursing program at Lyon. Pending approval from the College's regional accreditor, the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), the nursing program could begin in 2023 and would utilize both the Lyon campus and WRHS resources.

Taverner has worked with the Board of Trustees, as well as faculty and staff, to expand Lyon College's mission statement to offer select graduate programs. Under her direction, the College began developing plans for proposed veterinary and dental schools located in Little Rock. The schools will be part of the new Lyon College Institute of Health Sciences.

The College's faculty assembly and Board of Trustees approved both proposals in March, and the proposals for academic changes were submitted to the College's regional accreditor, the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), on Tuesday, March 15. Following consideration by HLC, the College will submit the prepared accreditation applications with both the American Veterinary Medical Association's Council on Education and the Commission on Dental Accreditation. Pending the accreditors' approval, inaugural classes could start as early as 2024 or 2025.