



Alverno's original Weekend College

Initial program exceeded expectations, remains strong today

By Shelly Most
Publications Editor

In 1977, women had many roles, just as they do now: wife, mother, full-time employee, with numerous



During the first semester of Weekend College in 1977, an Alverno student reads over material about the program.

tasks to balance. Many sought an education but because of the demands of work, family and other responsibilities, were short on time and unable to fit college into their hectic schedules. Then Alverno College came along with just the vehicle for women determined to get their degree: Weekend College.

Many alternative-format programs have since followed in the past 25 years. And Alverno is proud to call its program the first of its kind in Wisconsin.

In the mid 1970s, Alverno administrators began researching college programs in other states designed to meet the needs of adult

women unable to attend college within traditional weekday or weeknight timeframes. Alverno recognized this need and, after intense research and preparation, decided to establish Weekend College.

"We tapped into an unmet need in the community, but we didn't realize just how many women would be interested," said Kathleen O'Brien, vice-president for academic affairs, who at the time taught business and management classes.

A short article appeared in the daily paper and while faculty and staff anticipated about 50 women would apply, an overwhelming 260-plus enrolled in weekend courses the first year.

"The women who came really impressed us with their desire to get their education," said Austin Doherty, director of Alverno College Institute. "They just kept coming and we didn't know what to do, but there was no way we were going to turn these women away," she emphasized.

Alverno's Weekend College has, for 25 years, provided women an opportunity to



Weekend College students take a break from their studies and meet a classmate's son.

program celebrates 25 years

earn their bachelor's degree within four years by attending college full time, *every other weekend*. Part-time options also are available. Classes meet Friday nights, Saturdays and Sundays, so students are able to fit college into their family, work and personal lives. They are able to bring their workplace experiences into the classroom, and classroom experiences into the workplace. A wide range of support services including admissions, counseling, advising, financial aid and other business offices hold weekend hours to accommodate students' needs.

When the program began, a limited number of majors were offered to Weekend College students, O'Brien said. Students could pursue

degrees in professional communication and business and management. Women who were registered nurses could enroll in the bachelor of science in nursing program. Most weekend students were women in their early 30s, but many ages were represented. These students had postponed their college for a variety of reasons, but the common thread they shared was a determination to get a college education.

"Women started college later for many reasons: financial concerns, obligations to job and family. These are a lot of typical reasons women don't go in a straight trajectory," O'Brien said.

But once women signed up for college and began taking weekend classes, little was

going to stop them from earning their degree. Many chose to attend full time so they could finish in four years and be a part of Alverno's first class of Weekend College graduates, but some students chose to attend part time. In addition, some students who had transfer credits were able to complete Weekend College in less time.

O'Brien and Doherty remember the special dedication of the first group of students and the sacrifices each made to reach her goals.

"It was clear that these women were so happy to be here; they had such good spirit," O'Brien said. Added Doherty: "When I looked at these women, I thought they must have



Student in the first Weekend College program in 1977 participate in a group discussion.



shared a special spirit. It just opened doors for them; it was unheard of at that time.”

O'Brien, Doherty and Georgine Loacker, English professor, credit the first group of Weekend College students for their patience and flexibility with the new program. Faculty, staff and students were all learning-by-doing.

“That first group – they were the pioneers. You can't successfully start anything unless you have a group of people willing to be a part of it,” Doherty said. “There were so many experiences that could be shared. These women not only learned from the faculty; they learned from each other.”

“And that was something they realized as a benefit that would serve them for life,” Loacker said.

Today's Weekend College program stays true to its origins. Just as in 1977, classes are still held every other weekend on Friday nights, Saturdays and Sundays, but now, women have even more opportunities with additional majors from which to choose.

The majors include business and management; communication, management and technology; community leadership and development; management accounting; nursing (for RNs), professional communication, marketing management and international business.

Support areas of study include adult education, business and management, computer science, integrated arts and humanities and professional communication.

Today, the main reason women choose Weekend College is essentially the same as it was 25 years ago, said Mary Claire Jones, Weekend College admissions counselor. But now that the program is established, women have other reasons for choosing Alverno: its solid reputation and ability-based, assessment-as-learning approach to education.

“The greatest benefit of our Weekend College program is that students are getting an Alverno education,” Jones said. “There are other colleges that offer similar programs, but none that are structured like Alverno's.”

For more information about Alverno's Weekend College program, contact the Admissions Office at 414-382-6100.

Photos courtesy of Alverno College Archives



Weekend College students gathered for a welcome picnic during the first year of the program.