

Eureka College and its new president advance 'Uniquely Eureka' experience for students



Don't expect the interim president at [Eureka College](#) in central Illinois to sit still and wait for her successor. That isn't how Dr. Jamel Santa Cruze Wright sees her role, which began this past summer. Certainly it made sense to have an interim president, she says, because Eureka College is in the midst of rolling out a new, three-year strategic plan, which Wright managed in her previous role as vice president for strategic and diversity initiatives. Plus, the college is in the midst of reaccreditation by the Higher Learning Commission.

Embracing those challenges as part of her work, Wright is moving ahead on a number of initiatives without reservation. "Sometimes people think of an interim as a person who is there to just keep things going until they find a permanent person to move things forward," Wright says. "In my interim role, I completely plan to move things forward."

Located in Eureka, Illinois, the college began this academic year with 672 students. One day it hopes to reach 800 students, and in future years, perhaps 1,000 students. The college is focused on "the quality and value of a liberal-arts education," which cannot be understated, says Wright. "Many people don't understand what it means to gain transferable skills that many employers seek," she says.

Eureka College was founded in 1855 by Kentucky abolitionists who were members of the Disciples of Christ (Christian Church). Today, the college maintains a covenant relationship with the Disciples of Christ. The abolitionists placed a high value on gender equity in higher education, which meant Eureka was the first college in the state to admit men and women on an equal basis, and third in the nation to do so. Its church covenant relationship has also led to scholarships for incoming students, and a values commitment to social justice and community responsibility.



Eureka College President Jamel Santa Cruze Wright

"We have carried that forward with great intentionality and continue to do so. The values of the Christian Church that our founders brought to the college – we try to make sure we represent that well," says Wright. "It's higher education for a higher purpose."

First in her family to earn a college degree, Wright's expertise in crisis management

Wright joined Eureka College in 2014 from Saint Louis (Missouri) University, where she was a faculty member in the Department of Communication. While there, she developed a curriculum on race and ethnicity, and held adjunct appointments in the School for Professional Studies, Cook School of Business and was an affiliated faculty member in African American Studies. She previously was a faculty member at Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts. The first in her family to earn a college degree, Wright completed a bachelor's degree from Missouri Western State University, St. Joseph, plus a master's degree and doctorate from the University of Kansas, Lawrence. All of her degrees are in communication studies.

Her training and experience in communication and crisis management led to roles with a working group in Ferguson, Missouri, which focused on community policing, racial bias, health and wellness and mass demonstrations. Wright helped the Ferguson Police Department improve its training after protests and rioting after the fatal shooting of Michael Brown in 2014.



Eureka College's founders placed a high value on gender equity in higher education when it opened in 1855.

Like her, about 60 percent of the student body at Eureka are first-generation college students. That's why the college emphasizes its role in creating a place for students that is "engaging, open, welcoming and inclusive," Wright says, noting that the idea is emphasized in Eureka College's new branding campaign, "Uniquely Eureka."

"For us, students are able to have a unique experience that is their own," Wright says. "'Uniquely Eureka' represents the fact students can come and find their own unique path. It's not something defined for them." That means participation in a campus club or organization, sports, or a theater or music production. Students find a community at Eureka College, she says.

The word that Wright uses to describe the college's academic mission is "transformational" – a place that transforms students into leaders prepared for the modern workforce. At Eureka, it begins with a solid teaching mission, Wright says. Among its best-known academic programs is education, Wright says, adding that the college's placement rate for new teachers is very high. A fast-growing program is criminal justice, thanks to faculty innovation in the classroom. In addition, Eureka College enjoys a high acceptance rate for professional programs such as pre-med, veterinary science, and occupational or physical therapy, while 95 percent of students entering the workforce are employed within six months of graduation from Eureka College, Wright says. The national average is about 80 percent, she added.

The Reagan legacy at Eureka College

No discussion of Eureka College would be complete without including Ronald Reagan, Eureka College Class of 1932, board of trustees' member, actor, governor of California, and 40th U.S. president. While At Eureka, Reagan acted in 14 plays, was a member of a fraternity and Student Senate, and star in football, swimming and track. Today, the Reagan legacy is evident throughout the campus, in the Reagan Leadership Program, Ronald W. Reagan Society, Mark R. Shenkman Reagan Research Center, plus a museum and peace garden bearing the former president's name.

The Reagan legacy reflects the college's focus on excellence in learning, service and leadership, Wright says. "The lessons that he learned while a student at Eureka College – his ability to not only complete his course work in terms of what he learned in class, but when you look at his careers, he actually started at Eureka College and found his voice. We were able to provide that focus for him. And, we like to say Eureka College made Ronald Reagan." Eureka College holds the distinction of being the smallest college to graduate a U.S. president.

The college's strategic plan offers guidance for the college's future, Wright



Students at Eureka College follow in the footsteps of the college's most famous alumnus: Ronald Reagan.

says. This includes creating a new "signature liberal-arts program" that is "competency-based and interdisciplinary," she says. The plan also aims to bring together curricular and co-curricular experiences for students for a more complete college experience, developing new academic programs, expanding summer offerings and leveraging relationships with corporate partners in Central Illinois. Eureka College also wants to engage its 7,600 alumni in the student recruiting process by creating ways for alumni to help admissions counselors at college fairs, host student gatherings in their homes or at community centers, and send "care packages" to first-generation students, Wright says.

The college is also paying close attention to diversity. Its website and online view books are available in both English and Spanish, thanks to Prof. Emily Eaton, who spearheaded the Spanish versions. "We recognize that Hispanic and Latino students are the growth population of high school to college students," Wright says.

Wright sees an important relationship between the college and ACI, which she says keeps members linked and informed. "It puts us in contact with one another, and I think that happens through some very intentional efforts on the part of ACI," she says. "That is something that otherwise would not happen – we would not have the opportunity at conferences or other gatherings to get together with colleges with like issues in the state of Illinois." ACI's role in providing professional development for staff is helpful, too, because for some schools, ACI professional development conferences are the only opportunity for staff to improve their skills, and ultimately, provide a quality education to students, Wright says.

When Wright first visited Eureka College, she says she felt a tremendous sense of community at the college. "Most students say, 'Once I visited, I was sold,' which is actually the same thing I said."