

September 2, 2026

Dear Sewanee Community,

The academic year now is in full swing, and I hope your work and studies are off to a great start. Continuing with the communication plan that Vice-Chancellor Pearigen announced in August, it is my turn to offer some updates from around campus and a glimpse of the direction in which we are headed in the coming years.

Master Planning

As mentioned in my July communication, the Ad Hoc Master Planning Committee and its five subcommittees have been busy over the summer working on its first draft of a master plan. The five subcommittees have focused on the following areas:

- Academic facilities.
- Athletic facilities.
- Community facilities.
- Student life facilities.
- Sustainability and accessibility.

In its final stages, the ad hoc committee has faced the difficult task of prioritizing and sequencing the large number of worthwhile projects on campus that will help us steward our facilities and provide a vibrant physical plant in support of our strategic plan and University mission. The ad hoc committee will release its draft report later this week in order to gather input from a variety of stakeholder groups, including students, staff, faculty, regents, and trustees. The ad hoc committee welcomes feedback and will provide online forms to submit comments on the draft master plan. Those comments will inform the revision of the document before it is considered for adoption by the Board of Trustees in October. The master plan will guide work to improve campus facilities and shape the forthcoming comprehensive fundraising campaign.

FYE in Full Swing

Building on last fall's successful pilot of the [First Year Experience \(FYE\)](#) program, this year Sewanee welcomed 474 new students into the program. FYE Director Betsy Sandlin organized the program's three components:

- Explore: a two-day exploration of the Domain, surrounding communities, the University's history, and one's identity.
- Embark: a semester-long one-credit course that introduces students to resources and practices that will help them to succeed at Sewanee.
- Encounter: four-credit academic courses built around one of several themes.

Each first-year student takes part in one section of the Explore, Embark, and Encounter components.

Such a comprehensive program for all first-year students requires contributions from all quarters. FYE drew contributors from 10 offices across campus for the Explore component, 15 faculty and staff members for the Embark courses, and 27 faculty members for the Encounter courses. Moreover, many offices collaborated with the FYE program and contributed to its success. This year's FYE marked the first school opening in decades in which all of the first-year students arrived together to begin their Sewanee careers. Walking around campus, it was gratifying to see large groups of students engaged together with faculty and staff before the formal start of the semester in a way that I have not seen before.

The FYE program for all students was [strategy 1A in the University's strategic plan](#) and the quality enhancement plan (QEP) for our recent reaffirmation of accreditation report to SACSCOC. FYE Director Betsy Sandlin and Nick Roberts, who serves as the QEP team leader, will monitor and assess the experiences of students who go through the program. The goal of the program is to enhance students' sense of belonging, familiarity with institutional resources, and attachment to Sewanee, so that they enjoy high levels of success. Betsy and Nick are also both teaching in FYE alongside their administrative duties. Among other measures of success, we expect that the FYE program will improve student retention and graduation rates. Sincere thanks go to Betsy Sandlin for successfully organizing and launching this comprehensive program for all of our first-year students.

Career Readiness and Student Support Services

During the last year, there have been several changes in our student support services organization and team. For example, student success coaching functions moved from Sewanee Career Readiness to Student Life and the Office of the Dean of the College. Sewanee Career Readiness retains a robust staff and set of programs throughout the year and continues to assist students (and recent graduates) in discerning career goals, finding internships, developing leadership skills, and connecting to alumni and other professionals in a variety of fields. You can expect to hear more about opportunities and programs from [Sewanee Career Readiness](#) in the coming weeks and months. If you have questions or wish to collaborate with Sewanee Career Readiness, please contact Kate Reed, director of data and operations.

Despite the recent changes in the organization of student support services across campus, the most recent edition of [The Princeton Review](#) named Sewanee's student support and counseling services the third best among the top 392 institutions of higher education in the country. That is an extraordinary achievement for our University Wellness Center, including the [Counseling and Psychological Services \(CAPS\)](#), and other student support services on campus.

AI Support

Last spring, the College faculty adopted a policy that made concrete recommendations on the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in academic matters in the College; the School of Theology had already adopted a policy for its faculty and students. A working group of staff within Library and Information Technology Services (LITS) has helped fill a gap on guidance for use of AI by staff on campus. As Vice Provost for LITS Kevin Reynolds noted in a recent email, the working group does not seek to promote or bar use of AI in the workplace. Instead, the group provided

background information and training modules on how to use AI and useful guidance on appropriate uses of AI programs, which can be found [on a newly created webpage](#).

One of the concerns that LITS and the University have about the use of AI by staff is ensuring that proprietary and personal information are not inadvertently shared by engagement with AI programs. Using Microsoft Co-Pilot and Gemini on our apps helps to ensure that such information is not passed on to others. I want to thank the LITS working group for assembling this webpage and the information and training on it. I also ask members of the University community to use Microsoft Co-Pilot and Gemini to help prevent inadvertent sharing of data.

Changes in Curricular Practical Training for International Students

Many international students who come to Sewanee have enjoyed the opportunity to pursue practical experiences such as internships in the U.S., which enhance their education. International students have been authorized to pursue such experiences (called “curricular practical training” or CPT) under federal regulations that govern international students in the U.S. On Aug. 12, 2026, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security issued new guidance on enforcement of rules related to CPT for international students in the U.S. It followed up on that announcement with an FAQ document that clarified the new guidance for designated school officials (DSOs, the people who administer the system that tracks international students in the U.S.).

According to Student and Exchange Visitor Program regulations, "Curricular practical training is defined as alternative work/study, internship, cooperative education or any other type of required internship or practicum that is offered by sponsoring employers through cooperative agreements with the school." DSOs may only authorize international students to "participate in a CPT program that is an integral part of an established curriculum." These elements of the regulations governing CPT have not changed, but the DHS interpretation of the regulations has been altered. DHS now states that any CPT authorized by DSOs for international students must be for an experiential learning experience required of all students—foreign and domestic—in a particular course of study or for all students at the school. For example, a school may authorize CPT for an internship for an economics major only if an internship is required of all economics majors. (Similar interpretations would apply to general education requirements.) Currently, the College does not have academic requirements in place at the level of majors or in the general education curriculum that require all students to complete an internship, practicum, or other experiential learning. As a result, the College must suspend authorization of CPT until it determines any steps it would take to revise its curriculum in a way that would allow compliance according to this new, stricter interpretation.

While the regulations and interpretations apply to CPT that occurs off-campus in the U.S., it does not affect research and experiential learning on campus or abroad. Although we have temporarily suspended authorization of CPT (in the U.S.), we will work with international students to provide meaningful practical training experiences on campus and outside of the U.S.

For more information about this regulation and guidance, please contact Marcus Murphy, director of the Office of Global Citizenship; Travis Parker, international student and scholar advisor; or Abby Colbert, assistant counsel for global affairs.

Anxious Moments

The start of the school year is a time of excitement; students arrive on campus full of energy and the buildings and quads are abuzz with activity. Since becoming an administrator, I have taught one class each fall, usually on Chinese politics, my research focus. Despite having taught at Sewanee for 32 years, in the nights leading up to the first day of class, I typically have anxiety dreams. Some recurring themes include not being able to find my classroom, reporting to work and not realizing it is the first day of class, and not being able to find my notes for class. Some faculty readers may have their own versions of these anxiety-laden dreams. The oddest version of this dream involved my leading a group of students on a trip in China, in which I tried to deliver them to their dorm rooms by driving a minibus up a staircase—the kind with two switchbacks for each floor! Since becoming an administrator, my start-of-school dreams include concerns about facilities being prepared on time, mixed in with my inability to find my classroom.

While I work through my professional doubts in my nocturnal meanderings, I also feel a sense of excitement and stress stepping into the actual classroom on the first day. The excitement is born of meeting new students and knowing that on my own first day of undergraduate classes, I met the person who would become my lifetime professional mentor. Entering the classroom, I look around at the students and wonder if I will serve as a mentor to one of them, an opportunity and responsibility that I don't take lightly. The stress results from teaching in a rapidly changing field (Chinese politics) and the uncertainty of whether some Chinese breakthrough occurred last week that I might have somehow missed.

This pattern of stress and excitement about the abundant opportunity of the start of the year has played out over my 33 years of first classes in the fall. By now, I know how the script concludes; the short version is everything turns out fine. I find my footing teaching new material on subjects that I have studied for decades, and I connect with a fair number of students in each class. I have begun to tell my students about these anxious moments and opportunities for mentorship on my first day of class. I believe that it helps to normalize their own apprehensions and to signal to them that they will find they belong here. In some cases, they may even find their lifelong mentor by stepping into a class that they never imagined would change their lives. For me, that is the beauty of a liberal arts experience for students and faculty (and staff) alike, and it more than offsets the anxious moments of sleep.

Sincerely,
Scott Wilson
Provost