

Students Support Success

The opening of the new Academic Resource Center is a win-win for students and faculty



Years of thought and preparation went into the opening of the new Academic Resource Center before its grand opening in January 2000. In keeping with the school's mission, the center was designed as a resource for students who desired to improve themselves academically.

Patricia M. Wilson, A.B., M.A., Ph.D., was hired from Bethel College in Indiana to serve as director, while Jeanette Buttrey was appointed the professor in charge of the program.

The ARC, located on the sixth floor in the Cooley Center is an active place, with a day-long stream of students coming in for assistance in improving their study skills. For many, that assistance includes learning to read a new way.

Wilson, an expert in adult literacy, explained that different disciplines, such as nursing, history, and the law, have different ways of writing.



PROFESSOR JEANNETTE BUTTREY (LEFT) AND DR. PAT WILSON, DIRECTOR OF THE NEW ACADEMIC RESOURCE CENTER AT COOLEY, SHOW OFF THE CAKE AT A RECEPTION FOR THE ARC.

Those differences require the reader to adapt – to learn and practice a new way of reading in order to absorb the material. A student may have excelled in his/her undergraduate studies, but may

encounter difficulty in law school. That's because legal education books are written in a vastly different style than other disciplines and require a different way of reading them.

Wilson, who has been teaching for 30 years, was hired at Cooley to identify the challenges that face law students and to devise remedies for the school's students. Wilson devotes much of her time teaching students a new way of reading the legal writings.

"If they can read it the right way," she explained, "they can write (their exams)."

"Most of what humans do is in a pattern. Many academic areas have unique ways of writing their books. It's almost like cracking a code. Once students recognize and decipher the pattern, they are steps ahead on their path to academic success," explained Wilson.

Wilson is quick to greet students and make them feel at home. Not all the students she sees are in academic difficulty; many just want to improve their skills.

"The best is where they're not upset yet," Wilson said. "They just want to get better."

The ARC's track record has already had a positive effect on student performance. Even in the short time the ARC has been open, Wilson has seen numerous students, both those in academic difficulty, along with those who just wanted to improve their skills. In most instances, the students' grade point averages improved after working with Wilson.

"We keep meticulous records to document what we're doing and see how it helps," Wilson said.

One thing that helps students is finding out that (a) they are not alone, and (b) they haven't lost their academic skills.

"These people are really smart," Wilson said, adding that she reassures them that they just need new skills.

Wilson teaches students that different professors have different teaching styles, and thus, different learning patterns must be acquired. Once students tune into those patterns, their time in that class becomes much more rewarding.

Wilson also teaches students that they have to review every day what they learn in class.

If students review, Wilson explained, they retain 85 percent of what they were taught six weeks later. If they don't review, they'll show up at their very next class having retained only 15 percent of what they were taught in the previous one.

Feedback is also important. Wilson and a team of professors developed a checklist for exams in which both the professor and the student evaluate why they think the student did poorly. "It's a great tool to foster communication," Wilson said.

Wilson hopes more students will begin to perceive the Legal Skills class as vital to their education rather than something to be endured. The goals of the curriculum are to learn legal skills so students can do the substantive law.

Wilson has been pleased with the support she has encountered at Cooley, and the enthusiasm of the committee which oversees the ARC. "There is a lively exchange of ideas," she said of the committee meetings – ideas that help to improve many students' academic experience. The opening of the Academic Resource Center signifies another solid commitment by Cooley Law School to provide students with institutional support to better prepare them for practice and to become exceptional lawyers. ■