Your Backyard College Experience

The Valley Today with Janet Michael · Laurel Ridge Community College episode · Oct. 8, 2026 · 25 minutes

Guests: Guy Curtis, director of marketing; John Owens, interim coordinator of Student Life and Engagement; and student ambassadors Adam Gagnon and Alyssah Rodgers

Transcript

Janet Michael: Hello and welcome to The Valley Today. I am your host, Janet Michael. It is Laurel Ridge Community College Day. I am back on the Zooms with Guy Curtis. He is Director of Marketing for the College and we're going to talk today, Guy Curtis, about one of my favorite things about Laurel Ridge Community College, which is the college life part of it. That so many people think a community college can't offer and you guys have that in spades, I think.

Guy Curtis: Yeah, we do. Laurel Ridge is more than just classes. It's a place where students can get connected, supported, and involved. Outside the classroom or in the classroom, there's so many ways that we try to make sure students feel they belong at the college, whether they're taking a single course or perhaps pursuing a degree or just preparing for a career. There's so many ways to get involved. And so I think today it was a focus around now that you've become a student or perhaps you're considering a student opportunity in the future, there's a lot of ways to participate in activities. There's a lot of events taking place, even a more powerful way to connect with the college community directly. And that just helps you grow as an individual. So thinking about most traditional four-year universities, you feel like you get a lot of that experience there. But perhaps have you ever considered how much meaningful experiences you can gain right here at our local community college, Laurel Ridge? And so today I wanted to bring a few folks on, a couple of students, and John Owens, who's been with the college for many years, to share student life and how that fits into the bigger picture.

Janet Michael: John Owens is joining us. He's the interim coordinator for student life and engagement. But you have two hats, don't you, John?

John Owens: I do. So the student life and engagement coordinator position just started for me in August. But I have been with our library since 2004. My current role there is library archivist, which I'm still doing while I do this.

Janet Michael: We've also got joining us today, Adam Gagnon and Alyssahh Rodgers. They are both ambassadors. And you guys are really the epitome of what Guy Curtis was talking

about a second ago, in that you're coming to college, obviously, to get an education, but you're also looking to make friends. And we all hear that saying that the friends you make in college are going to be the friends that you have for life. That is no different from the experiences that you're having right now. Adam, tell me a little bit about why you wanted to get involved in student life and activities at Laurel Ridge.

Adam Gagnon: I was coming from a very isolated growing up experience. I was basically just raised in my household with my younger brother, homeschool and everything like that. And so when I chose to go to college, I knew that I wanted to put myself out there, meet new people, get a whole new experience, because I never really got exposed to that very much. And student life was just instrumental in the people I know today.

Janet Michael: How about you, Alyssah? What was your thought going into being involved in this piece of Laurel Ridge Community College?

Alyssahh Rodgers: So I was just looking for more things to do while I was on campus. And becoming a student ambassador has pushed me out of my comfort zone and really opened me up to meeting many new people.

Janet Michael: John, when Adam and Alyssah are talking about being student ambassadors, what does that mean exactly? How does that work within this particular program?

John Owens: So student ambassadors are really our student leaders at the college. They go out and represent us at community events. They do outreach, but we also try to provide them with enrichment opportunities. So we do something called the student leadership series, where two to three times a month, a different member of the college community hosts a session on leading with style or finding your hidden superhero storytelling power. Those are just two that we have coming up for our students that can attend those. We also invite them to attend biweekly student town halls, where we talk about how are you feeling about things? What would you like to see done differently? Kind of pulse checks with our clubs. Do you guys have everything that you need? And also student ambassadors, when students come that are considering joining our college community from the high schools or sometimes homeschool students, they often lead tours and show them around. So they really are the face of students here at Laurel Ridge.

Janet Michael: Over the last couple of years, I typically get in a conversation with your outstanding graduate from both of the campuses. And if I'm not mistaken, every single one of them have been involved in student life in some way.

John Owens: Yeah, there are studies that show that being active and engaged with your college or university does lead to success.

Janet Michael: What has your experience been like so far, Adam? Because this really was a 180 from where you came from to where you are right now.

Adam Gagnon: It was a huge difference. I always thought that I was an introvert. Like I always felt awkward around people and stuff like that. But coming to college, getting involved, forcing myself to go out there made me realize that I love talking with people. I really do love doing this kind of thing. Now it's so intrinsically like a part of who I am that it's weird that I ever had a time when I didn't think that was the case.

Janet Michael: How about you, Alyssah? What has been your favorite thing about being engaged so far?

Alyssahh Rodgers: Definitely the student leadership series. I feel like I have learned so many skills that I'll be able to use for forever.

Janet Michael: John, when we typically, and I'll say this as a parent of now a grown adult, but when we think of sending our kids off to college, for example, we're thinking, A, of course, we want them to get that education. We want them to be able to have a good career and check all of those boxes. For me, when I sent my son off, one of, if not right up there next to in value was that experience. I want you to go and make friends. I want you to do things there that either you would never have done here or didn't have access to while you were here. This is what Adam is talking about as well. There are soft skills that are built from being in these clubs that are also incredibly valuable as they move into adulthood.

John Owens: There really are. And I think there's a misconception that you can only build those types of relationships or have that type of community at a four-year university. And it's just absolutely not true. And our students are proof of that right here. For instance, when Adam was talking about not knowing how he would fit in and whatnot, when we had our new student welcome day in August here at the Middletown campus, he was front and center at our table telling students about the college, showing them what events we had coming on. And it was, I was like, I don't know if he's ever considered business as a degree, but he's got some real salesmanship going on right here. But we have a thriving community for our students. And it's not just the ambassadors program, but so many clubs that we offer, so many activities that we hold. Students can get that same experience right here in their backyard.

Janet Michael: Guy Curtis, you were telling us before we started recording that some of the people that are in some of these clubs, they participated in Day of Caring a few weeks ago for United Way. When you were on the show last month, we talked about the 5K and Student Life was in the weeds on that event as well.

Guy Curtis: Yes, a student took advantage of the volunteer opportunities we have at the college. He currently is an ambassador. He couldn't make it today's call, but I was, as a professional, seeing this student being very proactive, getting involved in a very community-oriented event where it's a fundraiser, it's engaging the local campus community, donors are coming forward, folks are there to support the cause. He was a part of that frontline team that was involved with registration and check-in and logistics of the event. He came out on his own free will to volunteer and support. So I think even to that level, there's so much events and opportunities where someone can just come in and get that experience that he showed that initiative. And so students really have that opportunity to come out. And even the next day, the United Way Day of Caring, he was there with us, supporting us in that charitable cause and supporting a local nonprofit with the projects they had that day. So you got to meet new folks at the college. Heck, I was even meeting new folks across our college and another participating nonprofit who was helping that day as well. So for him to come out and enjoy that experience through the college, get to know the staff firsthand, yeah, it's your time and energy, but that experience is probably tremendously valuable for him and other students who go through those kind of events that we offer. So I think what he really did was to show that initiative, but also put himself out there in a place to learn more and get exposed to things. And I think that's a great opportunity within college. And I think John hit on the head, you don't have to go far to experience that. You can do that right here in your backyard at Laurel Ridge, where you have a chance to grow as an individual, experience new things, lead groups on campus, or be a part of organizations that'll help you develop those soft skills that better you for the future.

Janet Michael: John, how do you typically determine, when you talk about the different clubs that are available, how do you decide which thing gets to be a club? Is that student-led? Is that something that administration determines?

John Owens: That is completely student-led. If you have a desire or an interest to start a club here, we will support you in getting that up off the ground. And that's why we have such a diverse option of clubs. We have a Dungeons and Dragons club. Adam is a leader within Phi Theta Kappa, our honor society. Alyssah is a leader within our activities club, where they just get together and do various activities, from dance to maybe having a game of pickleball, but just staying physically active. We have a cybersecurity club. We have a humanities club. Right before this interview started, I was meeting with the leader of our new flag football club. Students come to us saying, “Hey, I'd like to do this,” and I tell them, “All right, get five interested people, get a club sponsor, and we will get this off the ground.

Janet Michael: Seems so simple. And it's a good organizational project for that student to take on.

John Owens: Sure, it really is. The clubs have to have a constitution. They have to hold regular meetings. And we do ask that a representative from each club attend the student town halls that we hold bi-weekly. So there's a level of accountability just to make sure that the clubs are running as they should. But we want it to be as open and easy a process for our students as they can. We want to support what they want to do and what they're interested in.

Janet Michael: Let's take a break. When we come back, I want to talk a little bit about something you just mentioned. Adam, I want to talk to you about the honor society, because I think that's another thing that people don't traditionally think of associated with community colleges. So can we talk a little bit about that when we come back in the next segment?

Adam Gagnon: I would absolutely love to.

Janet Michael: We are on the Zooms today for Laurel Ridge Community College Day. That means Guy Curtis is joining me. He is Director of Marketing along with him. He has guests, John Owens, who is the Coordinator for Student Life and Engagement. Adam Gagnon and Alyssahh Rodgers are joining us as well. They are both student ambassadors, and we're going to talk more with all of them when we come back in just a couple of minutes.

[Break]

Janet Michael: Welcome back to The Valley Today. I am your host, Janet Michael. It is Laurel Ridge Community College Day. We are on the Zooms with Guy Curtis. He is Director of Marketing. Today, we are talking about a huge, we're busting a huge myth about community colleges in general, but Laurel Ridge in particular, and talking about their student life activities. So joining us is John Owens. He is the Interim Coordinator for Student Life and Engagement. We've got two ambassadors that are joining us as well. Adam Gagnon and Alyssahh Rodgers are with us. And we were talking in the first segment, Adam, and John mentioned something about the fact that you're part of the honor society. And I don't think people realize that that's a thing at community colleges as well. Tell me a little bit about it. Give me some history.

Adam Gagnon: Yeah. So I am the Vice President of Scholarship and Honors for the Phi Theta Kappa chapter we have here. We're the Alpha Beta Omega chapter of PTK. PTK is an international honor society for community colleges. It was founded in 1907 by women. It was originally a women's honor society because there weren't any. And so they came up with this, and it eventually evolved into what we have today, just a huge international organization. And as members of Phi Theta Kappa, well, one, it's an honor society, and that is always going to look good on resumes. And there's a lot of people who are part of it. So if you're going into

an interview, there's a pretty big chance that whoever interviewing you was also in PTK, so it's kind of that you have an in with them. There's a ton of outreach opportunities you get through PTK in another few weeks on the 28th. There's the regional conference that's going to be happening at George Mason, and so it'll be all of the regional chapters for Virginia, West Virginia, meeting up at George Mason. We're going to listen to a few speakers. There's going to be a bunch of networking opportunities. It just is an absolute blast. I've made several connections and several friends from a whole bunch of different community colleges across the state that I never would have possibly met without Phi Theta Kappa.

Janet Michael: Alyssah, you're a member of that as well, right?

Alyssahh Rodgers: Yes.

Janet Michael: I think it's interesting that it was created by women because, you know, we are smarter than all you guys, just so you know.

Guy Curtis: I know I'm personally aware.

Janet Michael: Alyssah, we were talking a little bit during the break about all of the different options, and John told me that you are also part of a work study that actually gets paid to work for the college. Those are incredibly important to a lot of college students these days. Tell me a little bit about your experience.

Alyssahh Rodgers: I love working in student life. Obviously, we host and plan the events so I can engage with students more and really just help to increase the engagement.

Janet Michael: Do you know yet, Alyssah, what your future plans are when you're done with college? What do you think you might do next?

Alyssahh Rodgers: I plan to transfer for theater, so somewhere in the acting field.

Janet Michael: So everything that you're doing now within student life is absolutely giving you some great experience to carry forward.

Alyssahh Rodgers: Yes.

Janet Michael: How about you, Adam? What are you thinking you're going to do when your Laurel Ridge experience is over?

Adam Gagnon: I already have plans to transfer to the UVA College of Humanities and Sciences to pursue my history degree. I plan on probably teaching. I think being a history professor sounds like an absolute blast, but wherever life takes me.

Janet Michael: You're going to have to get some tweed jackets, maybe some bow ties, all of those things.

Adam Gagnon: Look, look at the way I'm dressed. You think I don't have those already?

Janet Michael: John, it's funny when Adam mentioned a second ago just the Humanities, you were also telling me during the break that's a very broad club because there are so many things that could fall under it that could maybe have these little offshoots. I was joking with you that you have a radio voice and that maybe the station should come and talk to a journalism club. That would sort of fit under Humanities, wouldn't it?

John Owens: It would. So we've had an art club and a creative writing club and a history club, and that's all well and good, but for instance, this year they all want to take a trip together to New York City to experience all that that city has to offer the Humanities. But it's certainly easier to fundraise if you're fundraising as one club. So it's not just, well, this money belongs to the History Club, this money belongs to the Creative Writing Club, let's pull their money. One way we can do that is there's a Humanities Club, but then you can have these offshoots that still meet separately. So there's an art subcommittee, there's a creative writing subcommittee, but when they hold fundraisers, their fundraising for their Humanities Club makes it easier for them to support when they want to go and do these trips or go to a play and events like that. So that's something new that we're trying this year. My heart is with the Humanities, just with my personal background. The last three years I've directed the Spring Follies, which we've done here at the college since 1978, and this year Alyssah and her co-worker Jasper, who are my work studies, will be my assistant directors. So I hope to give Alyssah some real-world experience that will help her in her future.

Janet Michael: Guy Curtis, I cannot remember the last time we did a show highlighting the Follies. We've really got to step up our game.

Guy Curtis: I'm here for it. Definitely. This is an early plug, so John has already announced the Spring Follies will be coming here soon, so save the date.

Janet Michael: Do you have a date yet, John?

John Owens: It'll be in April, and we're still nailing down the exact date. We try to get in before Apple Blossoms starts.

Janet Michael: That's a very smart choice. Maybe I'll pop in for a rehearsal, and we'll record people on the fly.

John Owens: I'm always game for it.

Janet Michael: The other thing, too, John, when you're talking about the structure of these clubs, they are run internally of sorts. So you have a student leader who is running it. You have all of these things, but you also have people who are graduating and moving on to

something else. How does that sometimes impact what a club looks like from year to year or even semester to semester?

John Owens: It really depends on whether they have done a good job recruiting from the incoming class of freshmen on how successful they are the following year. And that has been the case for as long as I'm at the college. The success of a certain club may ebb and flow. For instance, we've had very active creative writing clubs, and then we may go three or four years where it's not even a club. The survivors are always PTK. They thrive, obviously. They're an honors society. They have fantastic faculty leadership, and they have for years, and that's a big factor. The level of engagement with the sponsors, which are faculty and staff members from the college, they can go out and recruit students, too. So if they have a big class graduate and they want to make sure that the club that they're sponsoring keeps going, they can get out there at New Student Welcome Day or when we do our fall picnic, which we also hold a club fair for people to come and engage with the clubs that are active or the clubs that are trying to recruit members. But ultimately, the success and a failure of a club really depends on the students themselves, and I think that's how it should be.

Janet Michael: Curtis, it's also interesting when John was talking about the sponsors being typically faculty or staff, because we have talked about that a lot in that your faculty, all of your staff there at Laurel Ridge, y'all are all in. There is nobody that's there because they have to be. They're all there because they want to be, and they love getting involved in these types of activities in addition to whatever their paid employee duties are.

Guy Curtis: Yeah, absolutely. Many of our instructors come from industry and their business experiences or personal life, and they're bringing it back to the students here at the college. And so for them, it's a great way to live through them and creating a club organization and have them understand how events work or fundraising might be and just organizational efforts around leadership in the structure of a given club organization. So I think, yeah, there's so many of those that are out there. Honestly, I've thrown a few ideas out there about a marketing club and Catherine, who's in our office too, but that was a club that kind of got started and just waned out based on current student interest. But as a faculty leader, staff member, I'm happy to represent a marketing club or heck, golf tournament, golf club, or even baseball. So just putting a plug out there for those students who want to get a sport or some kind of club together, I'm happy to be a leader for sure. To John's point, it has to be student leadership to grow it, maintain it, and see it through in and out. But at any rate, yes, our faculty are very engaged. And if you just ask them, I'm sure they're willing. And I think where a lot of those conversations take place in the classroom, those organic opportunities come about, and that's where many of them occur.

Janet Michael: So, John, if someone's listening today and they are a current student at Laurel Ridge, or they're the parent of a current student, or they're even just considering, hey, I was thinking about going back to school, but I don't know whether it's the right thing for me. And they want to know more about all of the activities and all of the clubs. Is there a central location either on campus or online that they can learn more?

John Owens: Sure. So, if they're online, they can go to laurelridge.edu/studentlife, and we have our information up there. They can always shoot us an email at engage@laurelridge.edu. We're located in the Student Union Building here at the Middletown Campus. Our Student Life offices are in there. You can find me here on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. I'm at the Fauquier Campus on Mondays and Thursdays, where we also have a presence in Wolk Hall.

Janet Michael: That's a good point, because as someone who lives just down the road from the Middletown Campus, I always forget to mention that you've got these things at all of your campuses. So, we talk a lot about Middletown because that's where I am, but there are students that are in Fauquier that are at that Fauquier Campus that have these same opportunities.

John Owens: Absolutely.

Janet Michael: So, Adam, before we wrap up, what advice would you give to someone who's listening and they're thinking, I maybe should do something, but I don't know what? What would be the first thing you would tell them to do?

Adam Gagnon: Pick out the mystery buses. I think those are the most fun, the most accessible. It's what got me introduced to a lot of my current friends that I still talk with from my very first semester is the mystery buses. It's just a fun little, you sign up to go to a location that you're not told the location of until you get there. They're fun. Every single time, we've gone to theme parks, ice skating, movies, just a whole bunch of stuff.

Janet Michael: I talked to somebody a couple of months ago. I can't remember who it was now, Guy Curtis, but they were talking about the mystery bus. And when they first said it, I'm like, wait, what? Is this like Scooby-Doo? What are you talking about? And they gave me the whole rundown. I think that is a brilliant thing to get involved in.

Guy Curtis: Yeah, what a fun way to engage. Gosh, I feel like I need to sign up for the mystery bus myself. That sounds like a lot of fun. Do they need a chaperone?

Janet Michael: We're going to put together a marketing club, Guy Curtis, and then we're going to plan some sort of trip.

Guy Curtis: Yes, I love it. Let's do it.

Janet Michael: How about you, Alyssah? What advice do you have for someone who maybe is on the fence about getting involved this way at Laurel Ridge?

Alyssahh Rodgers: Just do it. Go out of your comfort zone. If you're thinking about doing something, go for it because you never know where it might lead you.

Janet Michael: You've got the open house that's coming up. Then people can get a firsthand look at some of this stuff, right?

Guy Curtis: Yeah, absolutely. So if you're thinking about college and hopefully today's conversation got your interest a little piqued about the opportunities and ways to get involved on campus. So if you're thinking about a career change or going to college, finishing a degree, or if you're just trying to figure out next steps, we have a Laurel Ridge Fall Open House on October 21st. It's from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. at the Middletown campus. We'll have many folks there to help answer your questions along the way. We'll have a lot of things such as tours, chances to talk to program leads, faculty members, our career coaches. If you have financial assistance or financial aid questions, we have so much scholarships, so many financial aid opportunities at the college. It's just financially smart to consider us because of those opportunities and also being a third of the price of most four-year institutions. And so it's a great place just to get your answers figured out. And if you don't have an idea or a plan, that's what it's all about. So the Fall Open House on October 21st from 6 to 9 p.m. at the Middletown campus. To learn more, visit laurelridge.edu/openhouse.

Janet Michael: Great job, Guy Curtis, bringing some great guests today. I am not at all surprised we should do a public speaking or a radio show club, too, while we're at it.

Guy Curtis: Absolutely, yeah. I really enjoyed today's conversation, especially Alyssah and Adam and John. Thank you for coming on today. I feel like every time we bring on new guests, we'll always learn something new. And so thank you so much for being here today.

Janet Michael: John Owens, you might have the most fun job ever on campus, so I'm a little envious of you. But thank you for taking the time today.

John Owens: Thank you for having us, Janet. And also, we will be at the Open House, so come out and see us.

Janet Michael: It was great to meet you, Adam. I appreciate you taking the time today.

Adam Gagnon: And wonderful to meet you, too. Thank you for having us on.

Janet Michael: Alyssah, I'm excited to see what the Follies look like this spring and what role you play in making them a huge success. Thank you for taking time today to chat with me.

Alyssahh Rodgers: Yes, thank you for the opportunity.

Janet Michael: I will be back tomorrow with a brand new episode of The Valley Today, just a few minutes after noon. So meet me here then.

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