The typical student leader at Wake Forest University is … let's see … male, Southern and Baptist. Right?

Not this year. By a landslide, Joanne O'Brien was elected this week as the student government president for 1983-84. Miss O'Brien, a junior majoring in business, comes from Lancaster, Pa.; and she's a Roman Catholic.

It's been nine years since a woman has headed the Wake Forest student government, and Miss O'Brien will be only the second woman to hold that office. She took her first crack at the president's job last spring and finished a close second in a field of four candidates after a runoff. This year, running against one male candidate, she carried every men's and women's dormitory and won 70 percent of the vote.

As a freshman she played varsity tennis and spent the month-long January term living with a family in Switzerland that didn't speak English. She got involved in student politics as a sophomore, when she was elected to the student legislature. This year, as the head of student government's campus life committee, she worked on such projects as getting students better campus parking privileges on Saturdays.

She considers herself an activist — the kind who hangs in there and makes the system work instead of rebelling against it. "Students here complain about different things," she said in an interview. "Everyone's pessimistic. I'm not one who's going to sit back and listen. I want something done about … what the students are interested in."

Miss O'Brien looks forward to a new era when the university gets a new president later this year upon the retirement of Dr. James Ralph Scales. "I think I could be a motivating force … to ask this new president for things we'd like to see changed," she mused.

One of her main goals, for instance, is more liberal dormitory visiting privileges. "Girls cannot go to the boys' side of campus to a dorm during the week at night, and we'd like to be able to have that option," she explained. "And the hours we can be on the halls we'd like to be able to be in the rooms. A lot of students like to have group study sessions in a room. It would make it a lot easier."

Miss O'Brien came South by way of St. Mary's, an Episcopal boarding school in Raleigh, which she attended during her senior year of high school. She applied for admission to no colleges farther north than Washington.

"I guess I just enjoyed the laid-back atmosphere that was here," she said, recalling the faster pace of life in the urban Northeast. But after graduation she'd like to work in New York City — for several years, at least. She also hopes to return to Europe and has applied for a Rotary Foundation scholarship to study abroad as a sort of good-will ambassador.

Running student government, she admits, is going to be hectic, especially in early fall and in spring. Being president may take only one hour on slack days but six to eight hours on others.

"When I stay busy, my grades actually are better," she said. "I'm doing something that I enjoy."