



M.S. in Human Resources

## **M.S. Degree Program in Human Resources (MSHR)**

**Human Services Department**

**College of Education & Allied Professions**

**2015 ACADEMIC PROGRAM REVIEW:**

**RESPONSE TO PROGRAM REVIEW STANDARDS**

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## **Executive Summary**

Western Carolina University's graduate degree program in human resources (HR) began in 1984. Our mission is to prepare strategic HR leaders to serve in organizations of all types, including nonprofit, for-profit, education, and government. Since its launch the program has evolved to reflect changes in the human resources profession as well as changes in higher education. Our program is now completely online, and typically attracts full-time working professionals throughout the state and beyond who are either currently working in the HR field or who want to transition into the field. We have nearly 120 students in the program currently, making us one of the largest graduate programs at WCU.

Since the program's inception in 1984, our program's academic home has been in the Human Services department of the College of Education & Allied Professions (CEAP). We receive outstanding leadership and program support from our department head and dean. Our program shares our department's and college's commitment to helping people realize their full potential with an emphasis on experiential learning and community engagement.

Our MSHR program requires students to complete 36 credit hours (12 courses) in order to earn their M.S. degree. Most students now complete the program in just over two calendar years, taking two courses per term (Fall, Spring, Summer). Our curriculum is based on the Graduate HR Curriculum Guidelines developed by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). We have had our curriculum materials formally reviewed by SHRM and it has been deemed to be in full alignment with their guidelines.

We are fortunate to have four full-time MSHR faculty who are gifted instructors and provide a valuable scholar-practitioner and global perspective for our students. There is an emphasis in our program on providing students with “hands-on” HR experience and community engagement via our pro bono HR consulting activities. Just in the past three years, we have helped 27 nonprofits and small businesses across four states.

Our program engages in both formal and informal strategic planning activities throughout the year. In addition to department and college planning activities, the faculty team gathers monthly to discuss program priorities; We are also in the process of forming an external advisory board comprised of students, alumni, and community partners.

Looking forward, we are very excited about future plans for the MSHR program at WCU. These plans include having all of our courses reviewed via the Quality Matters program, increased alumni outreach, increased program marketing throughout the state, and continued growth in our pro bono HR consulting initiative. Given these ambitious program plans, we do believe the program would benefit from dedicated administrative support and greater flexibility in securing adjunct faculty when needed. Overall, however, we believe the program is well-positioned for a prosperous future.

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**RESPONSE TO PROGRAM REVIEW STANDARDS**

**Standard 1: The purpose of the program reflects and supports the mission and strategic vision of Western Carolina University and the mission of its School and/or College.**

The mission of Western Carolina University's MSHR program is to:

*Prepare strategic HR leaders for the profession. We do this by developing our courses based on the most current curriculum guidelines of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) and through innovative teaching which emphasizes using evidence-based practices, approaching HR from a global perspective, and application of learning through community service.*

Our program mission aligns very well with our department's, college's and university's mission (See Appendix 1-A-D for Human Service department, CEAP, and WCU mission statements).

For example, our program's commitment to providing students with a global HR perspective as

well as HR service opportunities is captured in this excerpt from WCU's mission: *"...to create learning opportunities that incorporate teaching, research, service, and engagement through on-campus, off-campus, online, and international experiences."* Our MSHR program also reflects the mission of the College of Education & Allied Professions as demonstrated in this excerpt: *"...provides high-quality programs to our students in all of areas of study, with emphasis on professional education and related areas. Second, we prepare graduates who will positively impact the region as educators, administrators, and other professionals in human service."* Finally, our MSHR program aligns well with the mission of our home department, Human Services: *"...Our mission is to create carefully planned collaborative teaching/learning environments designed to support our students on a path of professional development that embraces lifelong learning and prepares them to consider and assess information from local, regional, national and global perspectives. Students who complete our programs are expected as ethical professionals to seek to understand and appreciate differences in culture, ethnicity, and lifestyle choices and implement evidence-based initiatives designed to promote equality and growth among all individuals and communities where they work."*

## **Standard 2: Planning**

**The program engages in ongoing, systematic planning that is reflective of the University's strategic priorities.**

The strategic planning process for the program is a continuous one, involving the ongoing collection and analysis of data from current students and program graduates, organizations where our students have either interned or done pro-bono consulting, other MSHR programs, and HR-

related associations. From surveying new students (via the Human Services department) to graduates (via the CEAP's Office of Assessment), the program considers such data essential for understanding students' educational experience and identifying areas for further improvement.

Additionally, there is ongoing strategic dialogue among the MSHR faculty about both short-term and long-term issues relevant to the program. There is a scheduled in-person faculty meeting approximately once a month where program priorities are discussed. As an example of this collaborative process, the faculty team (and Denise Royer from the Human Services department) recently worked together on the content and appearance for a new exhibit booth display for our program. This exercise required the faculty team to agree upon the most important strengths of our graduate program to be highlighted for the hundreds of HR professionals who attend the NC Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) annual state conference where we exhibit each year. This exercise is an example of where our planning aligns with WCU's strategic direction #1 – "Fulfill the Educational Needs of our State and Region;" this discussion began at a live planning meeting, but then continued virtually until final wording/appearance for the new booth display was finalized.

Another critical strategic discussion this past year addressed our MSHR program's growing student HR consulting initiative with nonprofits and small businesses. This issue aligns with WCU's strategic direction #2 – "Enrich the Total Student Experience," as well as #3 – "Enhance our External Partnerships." While this program initiative offers both pedagogical benefit to students and community benefit to the organizations served, managing its growth is a complex endeavor and must be carefully planned because of the resources required and all the stakeholders affected (i.e., students, faculty, organizations, as well as our department, college, university.). To that end, one outcome of our numerous strategic discussions (which included

program faculty, Human Services department staff, and staff from WCU's Center for Service Learning) was to pursue a one semester course release for program faculty member Dr. Marie Germain to further develop the strategic plan for the HR consulting initiative and pursue grant opportunities to support the initiative's growth.

We are currently in the process of formalizing an MSHR Advisory Board. While we have for the past several years held informal annual gatherings of students and alumni (at the NC Society of Human Resource conference) to dialogue about program priorities, we feel it will benefit the program to form an advisory board of between 6-12 members, made up of students, alumni, as well as some of our student HR field experience sponsors and nonprofit organizations who have received our pro bono HR consulting services. We anticipate this group meeting once or twice a year (in-person and/or virtually) to review program goals, objectives, and priorities.

The program's most recently established learning outcomes and vision are as follows:

1. Program graduates will have a thorough understanding of all of the major functions of human resources in an organization and how these functions can be utilized to help an organization realize its full performance potential.
2. Program graduates will have the ability to think analytically about a complex organizational issue and articulate a clear point of view about the issues and what should be done to improve organizational performance, providing persuasive evidence to support their view.
3. Program graduates will be knowledgeable about how to research an issue through both academic and practitioner-oriented resources.

4. Program graduates will be more knowledgeable about their own strengths, weaknesses, and values—in order that they might best utilize their passion for the potential of people’s talent for the betterment of organizations they serve and society as a whole.

Further, the MSHR program has established the following vision:

To be recognized as the premier graduate HR program in NC and one of the best graduate HR programs in the U.S.

### **Standard 3: Curriculum**

**The program provides and evaluates a high quality curriculum that emphasizes student learning as its primary purpose.**

We believe the MSHR curriculum is one of the strengths of the program. The curriculum is derived from the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) Graduate HR Curriculum Guidelines (See Appendix 3-A). These guidelines were developed based on extensive research with HR and organizational leaders about what competent HR professionals needed to possess in terms of knowledge, skills, and abilities. SHRM, while not an accrediting body, is the leading professional society of HR professionals and has instituted a curriculum review process where universities with undergraduate and/or graduate HR degree programs can submit materials in order for SHRM to deem whether that curriculum is in alignment with the SHRM curriculum guidelines. Our program first submitted materials to SHRM and was deemed to be in full alignment in 2010. We re-submitted documentation in 2013 and were again deemed to be in full alignment in January 2014 (valid until December 2016.).

Student learning is a priority of our program. Our department and college require that each faculty member have at least two peer reviews of teaching per academic year. Our MSHR program faculty have found the feedback from the peer reviews to be very useful for making course refinements intended to increase student learning. Additionally, as part of our departmental annual faculty evaluation, the department head reviews all student course evaluations, with the minimum expectation of a 3.0 average (4-point scale) in all evaluative areas. Additionally, one of our MSHR faculty members, Dr. Kirk Smith, has recently been certified by Quality Matters, an international organization dedicated to quality teaching and student learning that has developed forty-three (43) quality review standards by which a course can be evaluated. We will begin the process next semester to have courses reviewed by Quality Matters.

#### **Standard 4: Faculty Resources**

##### **The program has sufficient faculty resources to meet its mission and goals.**

The MSHR program currently has four full-time faculty members: Dr. John Sherlock (program director); Dr. Marie Germain; Dr. Kirk Smith; and Dr. Yogita Abichandani. (see appendix 4-C for CVs of the full-time faculty). Dr. Sherlock is a tenured associate professor and has been with the program since 2002; Dr. Germain is a tenure-track assistant professor and has been with the program since 2010 and will be reviewed for tenure and promotion this coming Spring; Dr. Smith is a fixed-term assistant professor and has been teaching in the program (first as adjunct then full-time) since 2004 and Dr. Abichandani is a tenure-track assistant professor who joined the program faculty in the Spring semester of 2013. The diverse, yet complementary

backgrounds of the four full-time faculty members are a clear program asset. Our goal was to build a faculty possessing both U.S. and global HR scholar and HR practitioner expertise. As demonstrated by faculty CVs, we have achieved that.

The MSHR program is fortunate to have four graduate assistants (GA) each semester to work with the full-time faculty on primarily research activities (typically 5 hours per week per GA). Graduate assistantships at WCU are given to full-time students only, so our program (where 90% of the students attend part-time) would not be able to have the GA support it has if not for the partnership with the graduate counseling program within the Human Services department. We are extremely grateful for this GA support as it is essential to the faculty continuing their research productivity.

As discussed in more detail in our response to Standard 7, the MSHR faculty is fortunate to have excellent administrative support. However, with the enrollment growth we have experienced, as well as the increased student involvement in our HR services to nonprofit organizations, we feel additional administrative support is needed.

## **Standard 5: Students**

### **The program attracts, retains, and graduates high quality students.**

Enrollment in the MSHR program is currently 116, making it one of the larger graduate programs at Western Carolina University. Our program admits students to begin in the Fall, Spring, or Summer terms. This flexibility is offered to students so that they can begin the program when it is most convenient for them and when they are “most ready” to begin their graduate education. As shown in Appendix 5-1, our new student enrollment trends over the past

five years are very positive. The quality of our new students is also very good. While our program requires a minimum undergrad GPA of 3.0, many students have undergraduate performance well above this (see Appendix 5-1). We require GRE scores (GMAT also accepted) as part of the application process for all applicants with the exception of those who already possess an earned graduate degree (since they have already demonstrated their ability to perform at the graduate level.) While it's believed that these standardized graduate entrance exam scores are a useful indicator of an applicant's potential to perform well academically, the score expectations are purposely set to a level that does not exclude a capable student from pursuing his/her MSHR degree (i.e., 150 verbal reasoning, 141 math reasoning, 3.5 analytical writing). The admission decision is based on a balanced consideration of undergraduate performance, test scores, and professional recommendations, and there is no cap placed on the number of students who can be admitted to the program in a given term. The program director has the discretion to recommend admission for an applicant who may be deficient in one area but particularly strong in another. The graduation rates (see Appendix 3-G) reflect that the admission process is a sound one in terms of attracting students who are capable of completing the program.

All admitted MSHR students are encouraged to complete a "Degree Completion Plan ("DCP"), based on their anticipated course load and course selection each term (we publish a three-year schedule of course availability to facilitate student course planning). Each student is assigned a full-time faculty advisor who is available to assist them with any DCP questions/concerns and any other needs that emerge while in the program. Given that the program is fairly straight forward in its requirements (36 credit hours required to graduate; 7 required courses; 5 electives), our graduate students typically do not require extensive guidance. Newly admitted students are added into the MSHR Student Center website (via their Blackboard

account) where they can receive information about the program and network with other students. Additionally, students are encouraged to join the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) as student members. We also maintain an MSHR group on LinkedIn where students and graduates network. It's through the LinkedIn group where we often will learn about our graduates being promoted in their HR roles or taking a new job. We strive to contact these graduates to learn more about their HR accomplishments and have been pleased with how many credit their MSHR degree as having been integral to their career progression.

Finally, while the MSHR program has been very successful in recruiting quality students to date, limited financial and administrative support for recruitment efforts throughout the state and via the internet limits the enrollment potential of the program. As will be discussed in Response to Standard #7, we believe the MSHR program would greatly benefit from additional marketing/administrative support in order to meet its full potential.

### **Standard 6: Administrative Structure**

**The program has an administrative structure that facilitates achievement of program goals and objectives.**

Since the program's inception in 1984, our MSHR program has been well served being part of the Human Services department of the College of Education and Allied Professions (CEAP). Our MSHR curriculum has always placed an emphasis on improving organizational performance through employee learning and development, so having the program's administrative home in the College of Education and Allied Professions, where learning and development is a primary focus, is a great fit. Our students are typically working professionals in a wide variety of

organizational settings, including educational institutions, government, for-profit businesses, and nonprofit human service agencies. As noted in our response to Standard #1, our program aligns closely with both the Human Services department and the CEAP missions.

There was a time when our program was one of the few fully online programs in the CEAP. However, in recent years, the number of programs in the college offering online delivery has really grown, and we have benefited from being able to share experiences with other college faculty working with the Blackboard platform and the many instructional/technology tools the platform has to offer. As noted in our response to Standard 4, another benefit of our program's administrative structure is the partnership with the graduate counseling program in our Human Services department where we are assigned four graduate assistants (GA) to work with our MSHR faculty each semester.

Our program receives excellent leadership from Dr. Dale Brotherton, the Human Services department head. He has an excellent understanding of our curriculum and has advocated for our program's needs in multiple ways, including faculty resources, marketing funds, and travel support for scholarly activities and professional development. Dale Carpenter, the dean of the CEAP, is a strong leader for our college and also a strong supporter of our program. While he delegates day-to-day operations of the program to the department and MSHR program director, he has been very responsive to requests for his involvement and advocacy on significant program issues, particularly staffing and budget.

## **Standard 7: Budget and Facilities**

### **The program has adequate resources to meet its goals and objectives.**

As noted previously in this document, the MSHR program and its students have benefited from the support received in recent years from several areas within the university (in particular, the Human Services department, the College of Education & Allied Professions, the Division of Educational Outreach, and the Graduate School). However, in order for the program to continue towards its vision, enhanced budget/facilities support is needed in the following areas:

1. Dedicated administrative support: As our program has grown in size and complexity, the need for administrative support has also grown. While our MSHR program greatly appreciates and benefits from the administrative support of Denise Royer and Amanda Davis in the Human Services Department, these two individuals provide administrative support to more than six different academic programs and dozens of faculty, and understandably are limited in time they can give to our program. Three specific areas where additional administrative support is: A) Our student recruitment efforts; B) Our student consulting initiative; and C) Alumni outreach.
  - A. There are many online graduate degree programs available in HR-related fields, so ensuring that our program is highly visible across the state and on the internet is essential to student recruitment. The numerous recruitment efforts needing administrative support include ongoing administrative support for liaison activities with undergrad programs within the UNC system in human resource-

related fields, liaison activities with the 20+ local Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) chapters throughout NC, maintenance and enhancement of our MSHR website (recent Google Analytics data shows our program website receives over 950 “hits” per month).

- B. Our HR consulting initiative began in late 2011 with one of our faculty, Dr. Marie Germain, partnering with students in her courses to provide pro-bono HR services to local and regional nonprofit organizations. The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive; organizations have benefited from the HR consulting assistance and our students have benefited from the “real-world” HR experience. We now have worked with 27 different organizations and completed 67 HR projects. Coordinating the HR projects has become a significant administrative task, requiring several hours a week of liaison activity with students, clients, and prospective clients. We feel this HR consulting initiative is a real strength of our MSHR program and directly aligns with WCU’s strategic direction #2 – “Enrich the Total Student Experience,” as well as #3 – “Enhance our External Partnerships.”
- C. Our MSHR program has a rich history, having begun in 1984 as one of few graduate HR degree programs in the U.S. Since then, we have graduated hundreds of students who have gone on to what we hope are successful and fulfilling careers in human resources; however, our alumni contact database is very out-of-date. Learning from these alumni about how they perceive their graduate HR degree from WCU has helped them in their career will provide valuable content for our website and other program marketing materials. Additionally, we believe

that many of these individuals may be very willing to support our program financially—but have never been asked. Social media (search engines, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.) provides a number of avenues for re-connecting with our graduate HR alumni, but it is labor intensive to do the searching and keep track of the activities and results. While we certainly would coordinate any fund-raising initiatives with WCU's Office of Development and Alumni Affairs, they do not have resources for these administrative tasks. We have a vision of building a robust database of our graduate HR alumni, who are kept up-to-date about program activities and alumni news via an online newsletter, support our program financially, and attend in-person student/alumni events held in conjunction with the annual NC SHRM conference (which we do on a very small scale already).

2. Increased flexibility retaining MSHR adjunct faculty: With just four full-time faculty, we tend to have at least one or two courses each term with a waitlist. As stated in previous responses, our students complete a Degree Completion Plan (DCP) after being admitted to the program, and they are understandably frustrated when the course they planned to take has no space available. Not only is this not the type of student support service we want to provide our students, but it also represents a risk to retaining these students in the program. We believe this challenge can be best addressed in the two ways described below:

- A. Increased flexibility to retain adjunct faculty once the waitlist number of students covers the cost of the adjunct: Based on the current graduate in-state

credit hour fee structure, the state-mandated adjunct faculty compensation (\$3K for three credit hour courses) is covered by paid enrollment of seven (7) students. Unfortunately, in most cases, waitlists have to build to 18+ students before creating a second section and adjunct hiring is authorized. Given the flexibility in our Banner registration software, program faculty believe a better approach would be to hire an adjunct faculty as soon as the waitlist reaches seven and move some students from the full class (which typically is capped at 22) to the newly created course section to be taught by the adjunct.

- B. Increased flexibility to retain adjunct faculty who may not possess doctoral degree: Compared to many other academic concentrations, there are relatively few doctoral programs available in the field of human resources. Thus, while WCU's accrediting body, SACS (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools), specifies that instructors teaching at the master's level should hold a doctoral degree in the specified field, this presents a real recruiting challenge for our program. This challenge is made even more difficult due to the fact that the state limits adjunct faculty compensation to \$3K for a three-credit course. We do, however, have an excellent pool of adjunct faculty candidates with master's degrees in HR (many of whom have graduated from our program) who have extensive practical HR experience. Prior to the more stringent adherence to the SACS guidelines on adjunct faculty qualifications, some of these individuals taught for our program and received excellent course evaluations. In many cases, these individuals were graduates of the

program and, thus, had a unique ability to connect with students because they had “walked in their shoes.”

In conclusion, the MSHR program at Western Carolina University is a respected graduate degree program at the university level, the local community level, the state level, and is increasingly being recognized at the national level. By building on the current elements in place for the program and increasing the budget/facilities support in the areas indicated, the MSHR program has a very bright future.