

Diamond in the Making: A Quality Enhancement Plan Designed to Shine

By: Carol Burton

Assistant Vice Chancellor for Undergraduate Studies

As we embark on another academic year at WCU, several factors make this year different from preceding years. Unprecedented campus construction, a reorganized academic structure exemplified by the existence of new or reconfigured colleges and corresponding changes in leadership, and the promise of a very successful first capital campaign for the university are all impacting life on campus on one level or another. However, one key initiative's potential impact is cemented in my mind: our commitment to enhancing the educational experiences of our undergraduate students as a result of developing our Quality Enhancement Plan.

The buzz on campus as well as the regional and national attention our QEP is generating is highly encouraging. Faculty, students and staff can expect to see opportunities and challenges related to implementing our QEP, Synthesis: A pathway to intentional learning at WCU. They will see it materialize in myriad programs and units, including in the Office of Career Services.

What are the implications of the QEP for students? What are the implications for faculty? How soon will the QEP be implemented? What are the objectives of the plan? How was the theme of the QEP selected? The new Office for Undergraduate Studies at WCU will coordinate activities related to helping students make connections between their in-class and out-of-class experiences, i.e., the focus of the QEP. The office will also provide oversight for the Center for Service Learning, the Liberal Studies Program, and the American Democracy Project, all programs or projects which rely on integrating and applying knowledge.

So what is synthesis, and why is it valuable to learning?

Simply, Synthesis is the ability to integrate knowledge from different areas into an original whole, and as the corner stone of WCU's QEP, students can expect, (1) to be more intentional and focused in their learning, (2) to have more formal and informal opportunities to apply their learning, and (3) to create a life plan for integrating their collegiate experiences during their undergraduate years and beyond. During the first year in college, special programming will prepare students to recognize the value of liberal studies, participate in activities designed to foster self-awareness, introduce the skills necessary for synthesis to occur and foster the development of partnerships with faculty to conduct research.

In the sophomore to senior years, the QEP will emphasize critical thinking and problem solving skills, analytical and decision-making abilities, and evaluation skills as well as major-related or content knowledge. Students will be expected to participate in internships, cooperative education (co-op) placements, service learning, capstone experiences and mentored research opportunities, or some combination of the same. We hope a greater number of our students and faculty will participate in international travel experiences.

Academic departments will work in concert with affiliated units such as career services as well as academic advising, residential living, orientation programs, student leadership and international programs to create the experiences that will reinforce synthesis as a valuable teaching and learning tool. Many departments are already doing a fantastic job of integrating their curricular and co-curricular experiences for their students, and they can expect to receive even more support to enhance their current efforts.

For example, a new technological tool will be designed to foster the synthesis that must occur for all students, and this tool will be available for every student. The Education Briefcase is a collaborative electronic portal where students and university personnel will exchange information to facilitate the type of student planning and reflection necessary for high levels of synthesis to occur. Students will grant access to their Education Briefcases so that faculty, professional

Career Journal, September 2007, Vol.5 Issue 1

http://www.wcu.edu/WebFiles/PDFs/careerservices_cj_sept-07.pdf

advisors, program directors and career counselors can maintain ongoing dialogue about their university experiences and their direction for life beyond college. Typical artifacts to be housed in the Education Briefcase include learning plans, reflection essays, degree audits, internship evaluations, research protocols, results from career inventories, resumes, journal entries from study abroad, and major papers, to name a few. Students will work with counselors in Career Services to create documents to be housed in the Briefcase and the counselors will serve as a source of information about applying for internships, co-ops, and jobs.

Synthesis reflects the highest levels of learning, and our goal is to facilitate synthesis across all programs so that our graduates are even more prepared to live rich and productive lives in the 21st century.