

**The Strategic Planning Results of  
Western Carolina University's  
2020 Commission**

***Emerging Themes***

**Building an Identity for the Future  
(*Our Vision, Our Climb*)**

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## **BACKGROUND/METHODOLOGY**

Over the last several months the Western Carolina University community has been gathering data to support and identify its key assets, challenges and opportunities. This collection of strategic planning background material, committee resources, environmental scans and peer data reports provided the groundwork for the many stakeholder discussions that followed. These discussions included a total of 21 faculty and staff-led roundtable conversations and 7 off-campus community forums. In addition, the university encouraged individuals to participate by posting comments and perspectives on the strategic planning website. Both the internal conversations and external community forums and comments were designed to solicit the opinions and experiences of as many stakeholders as possible.

To help organize the data the University engaged a researcher to synthesize the materials into a set of thematic directions that could serve as a framework for the remainder of the strategic planning process. To do this, the researcher reviewed background and strategic planning resources and spent time learning about the university, the system it operates in and the regional community that makes up its service area. She reviewed each conversation looking for broad themes and common threads. She read the transcripts from each community forum and looked into the resources and examples that were discussed to better understand the perspective of Western's many stakeholders. While there were many important discussions, the researcher specifically concentrated on those that fit within the context of the university's mission and its potential. A list of resources and documents used to develop this summary is included as Attachment A.

## **STRATEGIC PLANNING RESULTS - *Building an Identity for the Future***

A consistent theme that ran through the discussions was the idea that WCU's significant growth has challenged the university's ability to define and communicate an image. Campus expansion, competition for students, rapid technological changes, and differing student expectations have all challenged the university's collective description. During the conversations the university was described as schizophrenic in the sense that "we don't know who we are". The university's "inability to tell its story" makes it difficult to communicate both internally with students and staff and externally with the community at large. While WCU has adjusted to the many changes that have taken place, it hasn't, as one participant stated, "decided what we want to be when we grow up". During the community forums the question was raised, "*What is WCU best known for?*" No single answer emerged. We heard things like "serving the community" and "student involvement". While these are positive attributes, they don't really communicate an identity. This same ambiguity came through when groups discussed programs. Programmatically, the strengths of this institution are hidden.

Over the last four years the university has reacted to UNC Tomorrow but has not really paid attention to its own uniqueness and strengths. Reaction coupled with the economic downturn has made it difficult for the university to articulate a direction. It has, by virtue of the UNC Tomorrow Commission, committed to being “all things to all people.” As one staff member said “being something to everyone dilutes our effectiveness and ability to shine”. It is time to decide what WCU stands for. This identify should be central to the university, marketed with one voice and embraced by all.

This strategic planning summary captures six themes that address the single most important question the university has to answer. Who are we?

## **BUILDING A STRONG EXTERNAL FOCUS**

### ***Repair external relationships***

Faculty, staff and community members are very positive about the Chancellor’s visits to the far western regional counties in Western North Carolina. They describe the visits as an important first step in rebuilding and mending relationships with the local communities. They mentioned the need to “repair external relationships” in the vast majority of conversations. Many stated that we must improve the university’s image and reputation, particularly in the towns of Sylva and Dillsboro. They added Asheville and Cherokee and stated that while the university does interact with many of the school districts, it should also interact with the communities it serves. Stakeholders believe that, as a community leader, the university can and should play a greater role in promoting and building its community presence.

Faculty, staff, alumni and the community are proud of WCU and believe that building awareness and recognition of programs and services will help the university recruit and retain students. As the only four-year educational institution in the 9-county region west of Asheville and the only public regional comprehensive university in the 17-county region west of Hickory, they believe that WCU must be more active in working with its community to promote education and encourage participation in programs that foster active citizenship, personal enrichment, cultural diversity and the arts. This will also help the institution build its identity. As an example, stakeholders want to see a more focused approach on a speaker’s bureau, professional recognition through professional societies and greater faculty participation in community service projects. Faculty would also like to see greater commitment to the Boyer Model of Scholarship, which recognizes that all forms of scholarship, including service activities that are specifically tied to one’s field of knowledge, be recognized and valued. Additionally, the university should focus student engagement on regional needs through its model of integrative, intentional learning (QEP). The University-wide focus on the poverty project is a good model for expanding this external focus.

Finally, WCU must take care of the relationships in the areas closest to the university and should take time to invest in the old Cullowhee revitalization project.

***Develop a physical presence in Hendersonville***

WCU's role in developing a well-educated workforce with skills in science, technology, engineering, math, accounting and business is vital to Western North Carolina, but its prominence outside of the main campus is not always obvious. While the university does run graduate programs on the UNC-Asheville campus, WCU is not truly integrated into the community and its programs are somewhat hidden and narrow in scope.

As we look forward, WCU should be more closely integrated with the Asheville area and surrounding communities to provide more opportunities for its students but also to increase the visibility of WCU graduates to prospective employers who are considering moving to the region and are sensitive to the availability of a technically competent workforce. WCU has the potential to truly strengthen the region, which was one of the needs repeated throughout the community forums.

The university has operated from a reactive position where program decisions have been based on the availability of the space on the UNC-Asheville campus rather than what makes the most sense for the educational needs of region. The university must address the trend of having current facilities drive program decisions. This has reduced the effectiveness of program delivery and makes it difficult for the university to fulfill its mission as a regional institution.

WCU needs to establish a satellite campus in Henderson County. Henderson County is in the center of the important I-26 Corridor that links Western North Carolina to I-85. Henderson County is the appropriate site because of its central location, proximity to Asheville, land availability, finance capacity, excellent community college, long-term population growth, and logistics infrastructure (including airport and four-lane highway transportation). The community is also highly supportive of establishing a satellite campus and will work with the university to develop emerging businesses support in the region and a central location for outreach.

***Strengthen the partnerships with community colleges***

While WCU has created partnerships with area community colleges the university needs a more strategic relationship with its community college partners so that transition from the community college to the university is seamless. Western currently has off-campus coordinators working with three community colleges in the area but the relationships are focused on on-line programming and a limited number of degree completion programs. This focus has not resulted in an overall increase in transfers. (Note that transfers from A-B Tech have been trending up while transfers from Tri-County and Western Piedmont have been trending down.)

Specifically, the university needs to ensure that community college programming is aligned with four-year college requirements, particularly for non-liberal arts programs. The university should also work on dual enrollment within academic programs and more targeted recruitment of community college students.

Finally, the university cannot ignore the assets of community colleges. Many have resources and opportunities that would strengthen the university in the outlying community. As an example one community forum discussed the fact that Blue Ridge Community College has a high quality public broadcasting technology center that's incomparable in this part of the state. The production studio can produce and stream on the local cable network and has the capability of expanding to more remote locations.

## **CAPITALIZING ON THE UNIVERISTY'S LOCALTION**

### ***Capitalize on outdoor recreation***

Throughout every conversation and community forum, we heard that WCU's location is both strength and a weakness. The university is centered in a beautiful, mountainous area with a vibrant cluster of countless outdoor activities. The university's proximity to the Great Smoky National Park, four national forests and endless natural resources provides the university a unique designation not shared by other colleges in the state. Activities within two hours of the university include hiking, river rafting, boating, fly fishing, gem mining, horseback riding, knee-boarding, lake fishing, mountain biking, waterfalls and sight-seeing, snow skiing (at Cataloochee), swimming, tubing, and water skiing. Yet the university is also isolated without the benefits of a vibrant town. For this reason, the university should not compare itself to the larger, more urban institutions in the state. It should concentrate on what it has to offer. WCU has an opportunity to truly distinguish itself and to become the recreational heart of the region. The university should be recruiting students that already have an interest in these types of recreational activities. For them, the location would not be a weakness, but a strength. Base Camp Cullowhee (BCC) should serve not only as a resource center, but also as a recruitment tool. The university should concentrate on the outdoor industry, including parks and recreation, tourism and the environment. This, in part, will help give the university more of an identity and connect students to both the college and the environment in which it is centered.

### ***Attract the community to the campus***

As a rural university, WCU has an opportunity to contribute to the cultural life of the region by attending to on-campus events and activities that involve multiple audience segments (students, parents, alumni, community members). Attracting the community can potentially bring in additional revenue and provide needed exposure to the university. As an example, the university can develop alumni leadership initiatives geared towards professional development. In addition,

WCU can introduce a stronger children's program and offer more family-friendly events on the weekends. WCU should also place a stronger focus on health and wellness issues that are important to the community and find other ways of making the campus inviting to alumni. Finally, the university can better partner with the regions' visual and performing arts organizations to enhance the livability of the community.

Opening the campus also helps to put into action the "Stewards of Place" model, which includes the domains of livable communities, social inclusion, and civic responsibility. Western's Board of Trustees adopted the "Stewards of Place" model as its official statement of expectations regarding Western's relationships with its region.

## **CREATING THE RIGHT MIX OF ACADEMIC and RESEARCH PROGRAMS**

### ***Eliminate low demand programs***

To a large degree faculty and staff agree that the academic area needs a complete make over. They point to use of degree productivity analysis and program review as a means to streamlining the curriculum, restructuring research opportunities for students, and striking a better balance between graduate and undergraduate education. Many believe that the university has too many options and no real priorities within the academic area. If program enrollment trends decline or if the number of program graduates is negligible, the institution needs to consider closing the program or at least reducing the funding for the program and reallocating resources toward thriving units. The university "cannot be a life-support system for dying fields or unimaginative leadership". "It's time to make the hard decisions, eliminate the dead weight, and minimize program duplication". They recognize the negative side of the equation is that respectable and interesting areas of study may have to fall by the wayside to strengthen the university as a whole. Faculty for the most part, are quite ready for change and recognize that for WCU to thrive it must invest in academic programs that matter and best meet the needs of students. As many have said, "we cannot be all things to all people". "We can still be exceptional, indeed increasingly so, in many diverse fields of study. It is this potential for and commitment to academic excellence that should define our future". As a regional university, WCU's educational offerings and services should be strongly influenced by its location and the opportunities within it.

### ***Create Academic Areas of Excellence***

The consensus suggests that WCU should identify a few academic areas of excellence that address the top economic drivers in the WNC region. The drivers mentioned most often in conversations and in the community forums include climate change and the environment, clean energy and vehicle technology, health/gerontology, and recreation and tourism. Each academic

cluster is represented by a growth industry and is supported, not only by what the university currently offers, but also by a large number of research institutions in the region and a geographical setting that supports the academic area.

#### *Climate and Environmental Technology*

With one of the world's most biologically diverse ecosystems, major watersheds, productive soils, rich mineral deposits, as well as an envious host of research opportunities, WNC is well positioned to host a *strong* science-based climate and environmental technology program. Western already has academic strength (in teaching, research and service) in important environmental technology areas. This strength, however, is not well known outside of the college and it is not very visible on the website and/or in college publications.

#### *Clean Energy and Vehicle Technology*

During the conversations and forums a number of participants discussed the fact that the WNC area is the epicenter for earth friendly clean energy technology. Clean-energy businesses and projects specifically being looked at are ones involved with renewable energy, energy efficiency, and alternative fuel and vehicle technologies. Many of these technologies require electrical engineers and participants were quick to point out the need for more engineering programs. WNC is challenged by a shortage of engineers, particularly those with advanced degrees. Although certain portions of the region may offer better access to engineers than others, this region is lacking the highly-educated and highly-skilled engineers that can be so crucial to the growth and development of the clean energy industry.<sup>1</sup> Too many students are completing their studies outside of the region leading to the brain drain we heard about so often in the forums. While it is a fact of modern economic life that most STEM and knowledge jobs are migrating to urban areas, the university can do a better job of keeping students in this area. The university's Center for Rapid Product Realization and the Center For Entrepreneurship and Innovation should be a start.

#### *Health/Gerontology*

Participants were concerned that the number of skilled health care workers will not keep pace with the aging population. While there is no standard on the correct number of health care practitioners needed to serve a region, there is concern that the western region will experience a shortage. WCU is currently a major provider of nursing education and applied research in the region, but its programs are limited. The College of Health and Human Sciences is well positioned to expand its emphasis on curricula related to aging and rural health care, areas that have been defined as that most important to the community. With a new 138,000 square foot Health & Human Sciences building on the

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<sup>1</sup> Western North Carolina Clean Energy Cluster Analysis September 2011

west campus the university can provide undergraduate, graduate and professional development that will educate an equitable number of health care providers to support the entire service region. Additionally, Western might consider “alternative healthcare” as a growing field and one that matches the culture of the region.

### *Recreation and Tourism*

As stated earlier, WCU should embrace its geographical location as a strength. The university should have a leading program in recreation and tourism with a concentration on the outdoor industry, including national parks and the environment. The Great Smoky Mountain National Park had more than 9.4 million recreational visits in 2010, which is the highest visitation of any of the 58 national parks and more than twice as many as the second most heavily visited, the Grand Canyon, which had 4.4 million visits<sup>2</sup>. The park provides an economic hub generating over \$718 million a year for the surrounding communities. While the university offers a Parks and Recreation major as well as a Hospitality and Tourism major, participants want to see the university take these programs to the next level and maybe even develop a tourism institute for the Southeast. Again, this will help give the university more of an identity and connect students to both the college and the environment in which it is centered.

### ***Better Define the Research Agenda***

The Western North Carolina region has been defined as having “the absence of a major research university”. While WCU’s mission is not to be a major research institution, it can help fill a void within a targeted area of study. But it must first have a clearly defined research agenda for the institution. Research at WCU was described as disjointed with some faculty not really understanding how to maneuver the somewhat complex process. The university must improve the research infrastructure and take a comprehensive look at the areas with the maximum benefit and greatest efficiency. While the university is torn in this area, many believe that the institution needs to establish one, perhaps two, broad priorities that will help define the type of research that will have the most significant impact on the region and the country, maybe even globally. The university needs to identify a niche that will help drive the research agenda, the academic programs that support that agenda and solidify its identity, which seems to be lacking. Using the unique environmental assets of the region the university has real opportunity to garner more prestige. The challenge will be to develop this critical research infrastructure with limited financial resources. Some feel that the university should concentrate on applied research focusing on land use, the Southern Appalachia biodiversity, and environmental ecology.

Western North Carolina is one of the most biologically diverse places in the country and has access to research opportunities that are the envy of universities worldwide. These include the USDA Coweeta Hydrologic Laboratory in Macon County, the Highlands Biological Station, the

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nps.gov/grsm/parkmgmt/statistics.htm>

National Climatic Data Center in Asheville, which is the world's largest climate data repository, the Southern Appalachian Biodiversity and Ecology Center, the US Forest Service Southern Research Station and the North Carolina Arboretum. The question the strategic planning process raised is, "Is Western taking advantage of these opportunities in a thoughtful way or a haphazard one"? Can Western use the resources within the region to strengthen its research agenda, provide more opportunities for students, and further its identity?

## **ENSURING FISCAL STABILITY**

WCU faces a number of challenges in the years to come, but none more important than the stability in its fiscal operation and continued public support. Although WCU has been very successful in managing under a reduced funding scenario, (the UNC system has had to absorb a 20 percent reduction in state funding over the past three years), the state's fiscal uncertainty combined with new competition for students will continue to present major challenges for the university. Competition from distance education providers such as the University of Phoenix, lower costing community colleges, urban colleges that are located in more thriving communities and lower tuition from bordering state universities all present challenges. Added to this is the way the university has been funding some of its programs. For example, non-credit continuing education offerings are helping to pay for distance credit instruction. Changes to either one of these programs will effect the other, making planning quite difficult. The university needs a recurring budget and less reliance on one-time funding.

Some of these challenges affect the university directly; others have been established by the state legislature and are part of a larger state-wide issue that must be dealt with in concert with UNC General Administration. All, however, will clearly influence Western Carolina University's future, and affect the university's ability to stay competitive and, in turn, its fiscal stability.

### ***Resolve WCU's inability to offer resident tuition to students in out-of-state border counties***

WCU is located closer to 5 bordering state capitals than it is to its own state capital in Raleigh. These large state population centers have large numbers of prospective students who would add diversity and be a good match for Western. The university should be recruiting from these centers concentrating on students who are excited about WCU's rich environmental location and offerings. But the differential in tuition is a major impediment and without scholarship funding, which is severely lacking, students cannot afford the high out-of-state tuition. While this may not be a major problem for some of the universities in the UNC system, WCU's geographical proximity to three neighboring states makes it a strategic priority for this institution. A regional tuition rate with reciprocity in neighboring states would greatly enhance recruiting and retention and, ultimately, its fiscal position.

### ***Equalize tuition and fees between distance and resident tuition***

Distance education is one of the most important challenges for the future of WCU. Distance education contributes to WCU's enrollment, recognition, and engagement with a larger community. And the expectation is that distance, in a variety of forms, will only grow. Right now the university sees its primary competition for programs coming from other educational entities that provide the traditional structure of courses, degrees and certifications. However, the internet combined with the use of social networking and mobile and cloud technology could eventually become a more direct educational competitor. This means that WCU's biggest competitors (Appalachian and UNCC) are being joined by others, including the University of Phoenix and those that offer distance-learning options.

One of the most significant obstacles to increasing access through distance education is its segregation from normal university operations. The university has a resident-based instructional focus for many of its processes and initiatives that don't fully support or capitalize on the benefits that distance education provides. Full integration of distance education, including allowing institutions to fully cover costs of operation, is a critical issue for the future. Distance education funding is an issue that needs to be fixed.

## **SERVING ALL STUDENTS**

Based on national trends and statewide demographics, adult learners are becoming the fastest growing segment of the college population. Traditional age students (18-24) will decline slightly over the next 10 years while the number of non-traditional students (25 and older) will rise significantly. The non-traditional learner is more likely to be older, female, Hispanic, and from families who have had little experience with higher education. The needs of the non-traditional learner are different and, based on campus conversations, the university can do a better job serving adult learners. The university needs to consider flexible scheduling, customized degree programs and on-line learning.

In addition to older students, the university is also challenged by the large gap in educational attainment between Hispanics and other ethnic groups. Hispanics account for the fastest growing segment of North Carolina's population and the university must be prepared to support and serve these students.

## **ATTENDING TO INFRASTRUCTURE ISSUES**

It was clear from the discussions that Western Carolina University has a backlog of capital renovation and repair projects. The physical plant has been underfunded and deferred maintenance of both real property and IT infrastructure is at a critical high. With new buildings

on campus there is real concern that the further deterioration of existing infrastructure will occur. The university estimates that to sustain or return the physical plant to a reliable operating condition for its present use would cost well over \$100 million. This amount would be over and above the current facility's maintenance operating budget. And the estimated amount does not include the addition and/or expansion of existing facilities so they can be used more effectively or updated to meet evolving technological or programmatic demands. For instance, the wireless infrastructure within the library is currently not adequate to support access to on-line resources. This is an enormous problem given both the cost of on-line library materials and the need for both faculty and students to access them.

**Attachment A**  
**Documents and Resources Used to Develop the Strategic Plan Summary**

**Background and Strategic Plan Resources**

Website <http://the2020commission.wcu.edu>.

Website <http://wcu.edu>

WCU Environmental Scan (2010)

SWOT Analysis

WCU 2010 Revised Strategic Plan

5-Year Trends for WCU Academic Programs

WCU Fact Book (<http://www.wcu.edu/28504.asp>)

UNC Tomorrow – UNC System Strategic Plan

[http://www.northcarolina.edu/nctomorrow/UNCT\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](http://www.northcarolina.edu/nctomorrow/UNCT_Final_Report.pdf))

WCU's Response to UNC Tomorrow May 1, 2008

[http://www.wcu.edu/WebFiles/PDFs/UNC-T\\_Master\\_Response\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.wcu.edu/WebFiles/PDFs/UNC-T_Master_Response_FINAL.pdf))

Update/Accomplishments of WCU's Revised Strategic Plan

**Committee Resources**

[Moody's Investors Service Report on WCU, July 28, 2011 \(PDF\)](#)

[Asheville 5x5: A Five Year Plan for Job Creation \(PDF\)](#)

[Henderson County Annual Economic Development Report 2009-2010 \(PDF\)](#)

[The Inaugural Address of Thomas Warren Ross, Seventeenth President of the University of North Carolina, October 6, 2011 \(PDF\)](#)

**Peer Data Reports**

[Institutional Financial Characteristics \(PDF\)](#)

[Student Statistical Profile \(PDF\)](#)

[Miscellaneous Institutional Characteristics \(PDF\)](#)

## **Summaries**

Off-campus Community Forums (7)

Narrative summaries from 19 faculty-lead small group discussions

On-line comments posted to the strategic planning website

## **Other**

Western North Carolina Clean Energy Cluster Analysis, September 2011

Website: <http://www.advantagewest.com/>

Website: <http://www.nps.gov/grsm/parkmgmt/statist>

News and journal articles referred to in the *Share Your Feedback* section of the website

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