

The Mountain Heritage Center and the QEP, 2008-2012

The Mountain Heritage Center (MHC) actively supports all the goals and outcomes of the QEP by offering WCU students significant opportunities to research, create, and publicly disseminate exhibits, videos, presentations, and performances. We provide well over 100 annual Service Learning opportunities for students and provide class-specific programming designed to meet an instructor's learning goals. The MHC also provides educational programming to support a variety of disciplines. As a museum, we routinely integrate varied material from multiple sources to create programming for a broad public audience. Already well-positioned to increase and enhance interactions with student workers, the MHC has created a more professional working environment for all students, including a policy and procedures manual and job descriptions for all positions. We have increased professional expectations and opportunities for student workers while supporting student presentations at state and regional conferences. Students create exhibits, serve on committees, record material for broadcast, create video interviews, complete technical descriptions, analyze public events, create artwork, analyze disaster preparedness, and play vital roles in many other engaging projects.

The MHC has examined and analyzed our work with students through two externally directed formative evaluations (2010 and 2011), through student reflection papers, and with ongoing observation. The 2010 evaluation of our Digital Heritage Project (DHP) found that WCU "faculty believed that students were gaining a 'real world,' authentic learning experience by working on a DHP project. Students agreed that their project assisted them with career preparation." "Students felt that their DHP project helped them with self-realization. In other words, they believed that their project connected them to who they were and what their interests were. One student explained, 'it also helps you realize what type of person you are.'" WCU Faculty members also noted that students "get [their DHP project] published ... on a respectable, highly noted, website. Many students have gone from showing that work [their DHP project] over the summer and picking up professional jobs." They also described the DHP as "very much a confidence builder ... and any way that you can build up somebody's confidence helps tremendously." The MHC's 2011 Program Review noted that "student involvement, class projects, and graduate student projects are relevant, professional experiences allowing students to work directly and creatively with exhibits, collections and programming." Further, the reviewers found that the "graduate and undergraduate students who work for the MHC are treated as paraprofessionals with stated duties and a written work plan. They provide an important function in staffing the Center as well as receive valuable experience that will further their career goals once they leave WCU."

Additionally, the external reviewers saw a clear connection between the MHC's regional outreach and our ability to create engaged learning opportunities for WCU students, finding that the "activities and services of the MHC are responsive to the needs and interests of the local and student communities and coordinate an important interaction between the two."

The MHC has sponsored the student creation and publication of 37 videos, 44 essays, and a technical manual on DigitalHeritage.org, a manual on Disaster Preparedness for the MHC, and a chapter in the 2008 "Forest Stewardship Plan for the Waynesville Watershed." Students have researched, designed, and installed 16 exhibits (9 at the MHC, 1 at Hunter Library, 5 at the Jackson County Public Library, and 1 at the Chamber of Commerce), and contributed multiple presentations and performances to the Center's public programming. They have also presented at the North Carolina Museums Conference, the Southeast Museums Conference, and other public venues. Our student workers are also nationally competitive with job offers (Kentucky, Tennessee, and North Carolina), internships (New York, Missouri, Texas, and North Carolina), and graduate programs (Georgia, D.C., and Alabama). Most recently, the MHC is working on collaborative grant proposals with two recent graduates in their new professional roles.