

# Synthesis: A Pathway to Intentional Learning at Western Carolina University

## Executive Summary – Quality Enhancement Plan

### *Western Carolina University*

Western Carolina University, a constituent institution of the University of North Carolina, has a current student enrollment of almost 8,900 students. Established in 1889, the university offers more than 120 undergraduate and 50 graduate programs in a variety of programs, including in the arts, sciences, education, business, and health professions. WCU is located in Cullowhee in western North Carolina, near the Blue Ridge Parkway and the Great Smoky Mountains.

### *The Quality Enhancement Plan*

#### *1. Overview*

*Synthesis: A Pathway to Intentional Learning* initiates connections among existing programs to create a holistic approach to educating students. WCU faculty and staff recognize that a major challenge of higher education is the need for students to synthesize their curricular and co-curricular college experiences. The QEP uses *synthesis* – the ability to integrate knowledge from different areas into an integrated, original whole – as the driving framework for teaching and learning. This emphasis on synthesis enhances students' educational journey and helps prepare them for life beyond college. Many students view their courses and co-curricular experiences as isolated activities to be approached in check-list fashion. The QEP fosters synthesis across the disciplines, coordinating curricular and co-curricular experiences to facilitate students' development of a clearer purpose at the university. The plan's implementation will impact academics, residential life, service learning, student leadership, and career planning/education. The outcome of the plan will be students who are *intentional* participants in their own learning.

#### *2. Learning Goals/Outcomes of the QEP*

1. Students will apply the synthesis concept in key decision-making.

Specifically, students will:

- A. *formulate* a learning plan that integrates academic/student life and post-graduation goals
  - B. *demonstrate* synthesis in key curricular and co-curricular decisions.
2. Students will reflect on their progress through the university experience, maintaining an integrated (synthesis) approach to learning.

Specifically, students will:

- A. *connect* the academic and student life components of their university experience
  - B. *refine* their learning plan in light of those connections.
3. Students will evaluate their university experience (academic and student life) in relation to their future education and career plans.

Specifically, students will:

- A. *communicate* the connections between the university experience to future education and career plans
- B. *review* and revise their “Education Briefcase” to create appropriate documents (resumes, cover letters, graduate school applications, etc.) in preparation for life after university.

### *3. Implementation*

The successful implementation of the QEP will rely on a coordinated university effort centered on the principles of synthesis. The key elements of the implementation are:

- The creation of a QEP oversight structure that will implement, coordinate, and monitor the plan
- An enhancement of the services offered by the Coulter Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning so the center will enable faculty and staff to integrate the QEP into their teaching and university work
- An integration of the synthesis concept into admissions, orientation, and other early academic/co-curricular services offered to students
- Coordination of advising, service learning, international programs, undergraduate research, and career education through the synthesis concept
- The development of the “Education Briefcase,” an electronic portal through which students will be able to interact with faculty, advisors, and career counselors; it is the literal manifestation of the students’ learning plan
- A redesign of the Career Services Office to become a Career Education Center that serves as the primary resource at WCU for major-related experiential learning opportunities

### *Conclusion*

*Synthesis: A Pathway to Intentional Learning at Western Carolina University* aims to diminish artificial barriers that inhibit students’ abilities to identify and benefit from the interrelationships of their curricular and co-curricular experiences. The plan’s knowledge base is derived from research on learning conducted by Bloom (1954) and reflected in his taxonomy of learning, Kolb’s (1984) model of experiential learning, and it incorporates many precepts presented in *Learning Reconsidered: A campus-wide focus on the student experience* (ACPA/NASPA, 2004), *Greater Expectations: A new vision for learning as a nation goes to college* (AACU, 2002) and *Toward a Policy Framework for Higher Education in the Knowledge Economy* (2006, [ief.wcu.edu](http://ief.wcu.edu)).