

Synthesis: A Pathway to Intentional Learning at Western Carolina University

Executive Summary

Western Carolina University

Western Carolina University, a constituent institution of the University of North Carolina, has a current student enrollment of almost 9,000 students. Established in 1889, the University offers more than 120 undergraduate and 50 graduate programs in the arts, sciences, education, business and health professions. WCU is located in Cullowhee in the region of western North Carolina, near to the Blue Ridge Parkway and the Great Smoky Mountains.

The Quality Enhancement Plan

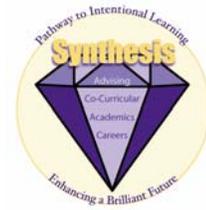
1. Overview

WCU's Quality Enhancement Plan, *Synthesis: A Pathway to Intentional Learning*, builds upon successful university initiatives already in place and initiates programs that will provide a more efficient and holistic approach to educating our 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 assemble seemingly unrelated parts of experience and integrate knowledge from different areas into a creative, original whole – as the driving framework for teaching and learning. This emphasis on synthesis enhances the 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 plan fosters synthesis across the disciplines, coordinating curricular and co-curricular experiences to facilitate students' development of a clearer purpose at the university. QEP implementation will impact academics, residential life, service learning, student leadership, and career planning/education. The outcome of the plan will be students who are motivated, self-directed, and *intentional* participants in their own learning.

2. Learning Outcomes

The learning outcomes identified by the QEP are:

- Students will apply the synthesis concept in key decision-making
- Students will create a learning plan (“Education Briefcase”) that reflects their education pathway



SACS REVIEW – QUALITY ENHANCEMENT PLAN
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- Students will connect the academic and co-curricular components of their university experiences and refine their learning plan in light of those connections
- Students will evaluate their university experiences in relation to their future career/life plans

3. Implementation

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

- The development of an “Education Briefcase” which is a shared, collaborative, 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
- A reorganization of the current functions of advising, career education, service learning, and international programs into a new unit that merges aspects of these student services
- An enhancement of the services offered by the Coulter Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning to include seminars and resources for faculty on synthesis inside and outside of the classroom; the Faculty Center will assist faculty and staff in integrating the principles of synthesis into their teaching and university work
- An improvement in the quality and an increase in the quantity of the culminating academic experiences available to students
- An integration of the synthesis concept into early academic and co-curricular services offered to students

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), and *Greater Expectations: A new vision for learning as a nation goes to college* (AACU, 2002).