**Courses to Careers: Building Psychosocial Competency**

**Western Carolina University**

**Quality Enhancement Plan**

**White Paper**

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**Executive Summary**

 Western Carolina University’s *Courses to Careers: Building* *Psychosocial Competency* enhances the former “synthesis” Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) by building on the behavioral and experiential pieces of synthesis. Synthesis allows students to build a total college experience by connecting curricular and co-curricular experiences. However to succeed in life beyond college, students need psychosocial competency to improve their employability and ability to manage an ever-changing environment. *Courses to Careers* focuses on purposefully growing the whole person by building life skills to utilize both personally and professionally, which relates specifically to 2020 Goal 2.1 by fostering personal growth and global and social awareness and 2020 Goal 2.2 by providing students with the skills to become active citizens (Western Carolina University, 2012).

 *Courses to Careers* builds on synthesis’s derivation from Bloom’s *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (1956) by providing students with the ability to make decisions when they leave college based on internal and external criteria. “Academic Excellence is important, but neglect in what are known as softer skills – of behavior, social responsibility and communication – not only lowers the quality of our lives but also endangers our prospects of enjoying the fruits of that academic excellence” (Dunne, 2014). These softer skills, also known as psychosocial competency, are the result of making decisions based on an evaluative process. During WCU’s 2012 participation in the administration of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), 48% of first-year students and 69% of seniors reported WCU only helped them cope with their non-academic responsibilities “some or very little” (Indiana University, 2012).

The *Courses to Careers* QEP will focus on four life skills: social responsibility, financial literacy, building positive interpersonal relationships, and improving self-awareness. By focusing on these four life skills, WCU students will be able to meet the following three learning goals.

1. Contribute to local, national, and global communities through service and social action
2. Identify personal characteristics that impact their ability to succeed during and after college
3. Modify behaviors and values to adapt to an ever-changing society

The successful implementation of*Courses to Careers* relies on a coordinated and

collaborative, university-wide effort. Implementation efforts can include:

1. Integration of the four life skills focus areas into first-year seminar courses, with specific emphasis on living-learning communities
2. Development of Financial Aid Sessions to help students build a plan to pay back student loans
3. Development of a pilot study to assess the integration of self-awareness concepts into the Health and Wellness curriculum
4. Coordination of service learning and social action activities into major courses that promote social responsibility
5. Requirement for major courses of study to build an experiential learning component into the curriculum that is either a co-op, internship, practicum, student teaching, or other field experience
6. Development of a Co-Curricular Transcript to document student co-curricular involvement and leadership experiences outside the classroom to encourage student engagement

The *Courses to Careers* QEP is designed to prepare students for the transition from college to career life. The plan is an expansion of WCU’s former QEP *Synthesis* and aims at increasing student success through increased employability and an improved ability to navigate life processes.

**Courses to Careers: Building Psychosocial Competency**

**Introduction**

 *Psychosocial Competency,* also known as life skills*,* are important to an individual’s future personal and professional success. This plan allows both undergraduate and graduate students to continue their connection from academic coursework to life pre and post-graduation by building positive behavioral responses to deal effectively with life situations. The *Courses to Careers: Building Psychosocial Competency* QEP will focus on four life skills: social responsibility, financial literacy, building positive interpersonal relationships, and improving self-awareness. This plan will guide undergraduates through robust experiential learning endeavors utilizing an evaluative process to build psychosocial competency. This reflective process is designed to help students develop healthy lifestyle habits, improve personal accountability and self-awareness regarding decision-making, better navigate interpersonal relationships, and increase employability post-graduation.

 According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2015), the top five personal qualities or skills that employers were seeking for the Class of 2015 were as follows: (1) “Ability to make decisions and solve problems”, (2) “Ability to verbally communicate with persons inside and outside the organization”, (3) “Ability to obtain and process information”, (4) “Ability to plan, organize and prioritize work”, and (5) “Ability to analyze quantitative data”. The four life skills of focus in the *Courses to Careers* QEP looks to improve upon the qualities and skills employers are most looking for in employees.

**Building Connections**

 Western Carolina University’s (WCU) *Courses to Careers* Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) enhances the former *Synthesis* QEP by building on the behavioral and experiential pieces of synthesis. *Synthesis* allows students to build a total college experience by connecting curricular and co-curricular experiences. However to succeed in life beyond college, students need psychosocial competency to improve their employability and ability to manage an ever-changing environment. *Courses to Careers* builds on *Synthesis’s* derivation from Bloom’s *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (1956) by providing students with the ability to make decisions when they leave college based on internal and external criteria. “Academic Excellence is important, but neglect in what are known as softer skills – of behavior, social responsibility and communication – not only lowers the quality of our lives but also endangers our prospects of enjoying the fruits of that academic excellence” (Dunne, 2014). These softer skills, also known as psychosocial competency, are the result of making decisions based on an evaluative process.

 WCU also has data to back up a *Courses to Careers* QEP. In a Spring 2015 survey to WCU Graduating Seniors by the WCU Office of Institutional Planning and Effectiveness (2015), which had 183 respondents, survey results indicated the following:

* 39.2% of seniors answered “Don’t Know/Not Applicable” to their level of satisfaction with “help in preparing for interviews, resumes, etc.”.
* When asked the extent their college educations contributed to their knowledge, skills, and personal development in using mathematical skills, 16.9% of seniors responded “very little” or “not at all”.
* 32% of respondents answered “no” to the question “Did your major include a co-op, internship, practicum, student teaching, or other field experience.

During WCU’s 2012 participation in the administration of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (Indiana University, 2012), 48% of first-year students and 69% of seniors reported WCU only helped them cope with their non-academic responsibilities “some or very little”. Additionally, 33% of first-year students and 47% of seniors responded that personal participation in co-curricular activities (organizations, campus publications, student government, fraternity or sorority, intercollegiate or intramural sports, etc.) totaled zero hours per week (Indiana University, 2012). In the 2012 Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) (Indiana University, 2012), 63% of faculty indicated that WCU emphasizes helping students cope with their non-academic responsibilities “some or very little”. Additionally, 62% of faculty responded students “never” participate in a community-based project as part of their course and 62% of faculty responded students “never” or “sometimes” have class discussions or writing assignments that include diverse perspectives as part of their course (Indiana University, 2012). If the students are not receiving opportunities to partake in psychosocial competencies in class and are not choosing to participate in co-curricular activities outside of class that can help to build psychosocial competency, then it is very possible that WCU students are not living to their full potential.

*Courses to Careers* focuses on purposefully growing the whole person by building life skills to utilize both personally and professionally, which relates specifically to WCU’s 2020 Strategic Plan Goal 2.1 by fostering “a student-centered campus culture that emphasizes academic excellence, personal growth, networking opportunities, and global and social awareness”, with specific outcomes related to 2.1.3, 2.1.4, and 2.1.5 (Western Carolina University, 2012). *Courses to Careers* also relates to WCU’s 2020 Strategic Plan Goal 2.2 by fostering “active citizenship among WCU students”, with specific relation to 2.2.3, 2.2.4, and 2.2.6 (Western Carolina University, 2012).

**Impact on Student Learning**

As previously mentioned, the *Courses to Careers* QEP will focus on four life skills: social responsibility, financial literacy, building positive interpersonal relationships, and improving self-awareness. By focusing on these four life skills, WCU students will be able to meet the following three learning goals.

1. Contribute to local, national, and global communities through service and social action
2. Identify personal characteristics that impact their ability to succeed during and after college
3. Modify behaviors and values to adapt to an ever-changing society

The four learning goals are articulated in the following student learning outcomes related to a student’s ability to build psychosocial competency. Since *Courses to Careers* builds upon *Synthesis*, it is suggested to build on four of WCU’s current learning outcomes from the Intentional Learning Plan (formerly Quality Enhancement Plan, 2007) and modify one of the existing outcomes slightly.

1. *“Integrate information from a variety of contexts* – Students will make connections between personal interest and abilities, Liberal Studies, programs of study, general electives, and experiential learning opportunities, and other co-curricular activities; and relate the implications/value of these connections to 'real world' scenarios.”
2. *“Solve complex problems* – Students will identify the dimensions of complex issues or problems; analyze and evaluate multiple sources of information/data; apply knowledge and decision-making processes to new questions or issues; and reflect on the implications of their solution/decision.”
3. *“Communicate effectively and responsibly* – Students will convey complex information in a variety of formats and contexts; identify intended audience and communicate appropriately and respectfully.”
4. *“Clarify and act on purpose and values* – Students will examine the values that influence their own decision making processes; take responsibility for their own learning and development in a manner consistent with academic integrity and their own goals and aspirations; intentionally use knowledge gained from learning experiences to make informed judgments about their future plans; and bring those plans into action.”
5. *Practice Service and Social Action* – “Students will identify their roles and responsibilities as engaged citizens by considering the public policies that affect their choices and actions; by recognizing commonalities and interdependence of diverse views/values;” “by acting responsibly to positively affect public policy:” and by contributing to local and global communities through service.

**Implementation and Assessment**

The successful implementation of*Courses to Careers* relies on a coordinated and

collaborative university-wide effort. Implementation and assessment efforts may include the following:

1. Integration of the four life skills focus areas into first-year seminar courses, with specific emphasis on living-learning communities
2. Development of Financial Aid Sessions to help students build a plan to pay back student loans
3. Development of a pilot study to assess the integration of self-awareness concepts into the Health and Wellness curriculum
4. Coordination of service learning and social action activities into major courses that promote social responsibility
5. Requirement for major courses of study to build an experiential learning component into the curriculum that is either a co-op, internship, practicum, student teaching, or other field experience
6. Development of a Co-Curricular Transcript to document student co-curricular involvement and leadership experiences outside the classroom to encourage student engagement

Assessment efforts include multiple measures to triangulate data sources to better measure impact on student learning. First, WCU can use the NSSE data longitudinally to determine student impact over time specifically looking at improvement on questions related to the psychosocial concepts. The QEP Assessment committee can assist First-Year Seminar Course Instructors and Health and Wellness Instructors to develop an assessment plan to report impact on their 1-2 focused learning outcomes. The QEP Assessment Committee can also work with majors to develop their own measureable outcomes related to implementation and impact or service learning and social action activities, as well as experiential learning components as part of their curriculum. Finally, Student Affairs and the Dean of Students Office can do a pilot to assess if co-curricular transcripts have enhanced student engagement outside the classroom by working with IT to further develop tracking of student involvement in Banner.

**Recommendations**

The *Courses to Careers* QEP is designed to prepare students for the transition from college to career life. The plan is an expansion of WCU’s former QEP *Synthesis* and aims at increasing student success through increased employability and an improved ability to navigate life processes. Although psychosocial competencies can include a variety of life skills, it is the intention of this QEP to remain focused on social responsibility, financial literacy, building positive interpersonal relationships, and improving self-awareness. By focusing university-wide efforts, the QEP steering committee and QEP assessment committee can better oversee the implementation and assessment of student learning outcomes. Since the intention is to build on the previous QEP, it is only suggested to modify the current student learning outcomes slightly to include service as a component of civic engagement.

With several opportunities for implementation, the *Courses to Careers* QEP does not need to focus on one particular sub-group. This provides the flexibility for curricular and co-curricular programs to best adapt requirements in the way the program feels is most impactful for students. Students need to prepare for the transition, both academically and personally, from courses to career and it is our responsibility as an institution to facilitate that process.

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