

CORE ELEMENTS FOR THE FIRST YEAR TRANSITION COURSES
at WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

Incoming first year students are expected to enroll in one of the transition courses offered by the university to maximize their opportunities for a successful transition to college. These "core elements" are an attempt to provide some uniformity and substance to the transition aspects of these courses.

Currently, these courses are:

- COUN 140 (Study Skills; undergoing restructuring and title change in summer, 2008)
- HR 140 (Leadership)
- USI 101 (Honors Forum)
- USI 130 (University Experience)
- USI 140 (Western Peaks)

There are a few programs or majors that offer specialized introductory courses for their students (Music, Fine & Performing Arts, Teaching Fellows, Engineering). While these courses are more discipline-specific, coordinators and instructors are encouraged to review and include these elements in their planning.

During the spring of 2008, coordinators and some instructors for transition courses met to gather information about the nature of each of the courses, develop a set of common experiences that they would like to see included in all the courses, and consider the transition courses in light of *Synthesis: a pathway to intentional learning*, WCU's Quality Enhancement Plan that will impact all undergraduate students the next several years. Some transition courses have incorporated many of these elements already, and a few of the courses will not need to include all of the elements because students are exposed to the elements elsewhere in their curricula. If you are interested in seeing sample syllabi for the transition courses, please contact Carol Burton, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Undergraduate Studies, 227-7497 or burton@wcu.edu

Academic Components/Policies It is essential that students grasp early in their undergraduate careers that there are academic rules and practices in place, and that students are ultimately responsible for knowing the impact of these rules and practices on their individual educational experience. Students should be introduced to attendance policies, grading scales, withdrawal and incomplete grades, four-year degree plans, grade point average calculation, and the roles of majors, minors, electives and concentrations, and similar concepts. The *Undergraduate Record* (catalog), department materials, and the University's Web site provide valuable resources for this necessary information. We recommend making students aware of these resources and information in creative ways, such as pre/post testing, fact-finding assignments, and class discussions as issues arise individually.

Academic Success Centers Students should be introduced to and periodically reminded of the services of the Academic Success Centers: The Catamount Tutoring, Mathematics Tutoring, and Writing Centers, as well as the Student Technology Assistance Center (STAC). Include these resources in your syllabus or incorporate a discussion of their services and contact information in your classes. Inviting representatives (particularly students who are employed as tutors in the centers) to your class is a great way to introduce the opportunities offered. The mission of the centers is to help all students become better students, but students identified as at-risk or struggling in one or more classes often need your personal encouragement to

participate in services. For more information on the centers, including contact information, visit success.wcu.edu and see attached *Strategies for Introducing the ASC to Your Class*.

Advising It is important to establish a student's relationship with his/her professional advisor and faculty advisor early on in the first semester. Advisors help students to select proper courses, choose careers and appropriate majors, understand university academic policies and procedures, and to cope with the transition to college. Transition courses can support advisors by encouraging students to schedule a meetings throughout the first semester: during the first few weeks of the semester to discuss transition issues, after 5th week grades are posted to discuss any concerns, around mid-semester for advising for the following semester, as well as at any point that a student has a concern or question. Professional advisors in the Advising Center are a great resource to use in transition courses to talk about Liberal Studies, the advising process and academic policies and procedures and are available to attend your class during the semester to cover some of these topics.

Campus Activities/Passports Students are encouraged to get involved on campus by attending athletic events, joining student organizations, and participating in cultural events. In addition, students can be challenged to become a part of the local community through service learning and civic engagement. One way to document student involvement is the Campus or Leadership Passport. This format provides a varied framework of activities so that students can make selections from a broad range of required and elective activities. The Passport can also be used to insure that students are utilizing campus resources, such as the Advising, Career and Academic Success Centers, and are making contact with their advisors over the course of the semester. Using the Passport in conjunction with instructor-created reflection assignments can enhance the student's involvement and synthesis of their activities. *A sample passport is attached.*

Career Counseling Students need to consider three questions as they go about the process of choosing a career - What are you interested in? What do you do well? What do you value in life? Taking advantage of the total university experience—academics, activities, work, service—helps students discover who they are and develop a plan for the future. All incoming students take the Personality Mosaic, an interest inventory, as part of CatWalk preregistration, and results can be provided to instructors and discussed as part of the transition course. Inventories of skills, abilities and values are available from Career Services and results can be used to help students discover potential majors that will help them achieve their life goals. Career Services and the Advising Center staff are available to transition course classes to assist with these topics.

Education Briefcase (EB) A central component of WCU's Quality Enhancement Plan, the briefcase is an electronic portfolio through which the student, the advisor, and faculty members can monitor a student's academic and social progress at the university. Starting fall 2008 the EB will be piloted in select sections of some transition courses with an expectation that in successive years the education briefcase will be available for all transition courses. First year transition courses and specific sections that will pilot the EB in fall 2008 include USI 130, section 07; USI 101; and USI 140, sections 03 and 13.

Engagement Incorporating in-class and out of class experiences should be an important aspect of any first year transition course. Students need to be actively involved in their education, not passive observers of it. Faculty are encouraged to use service learning opportunities, group field trips, and team assignments, both inside and outside the classroom,

to help foster engagement. In addition, instructors should explore and honor students' individual extracurricular activities, encouraging students to make connections between social, athletic and academic aspects of student life.

First Year Reading Each year, the First-Year Reading Committee selects a book that all incoming freshmen are given at orientation and expected to read by the opening of the fall semester. This book is meant to be a common academic experience that will generate discussion among first-year students and faculty in the first weeks of many first year courses, including transition courses. Faculty who teach first year students can get copies of the book from the Orientation Office. Three Cups of Tea by Greg Mortensen is this year's selection.

Leadership Leadership is the collective process to influence positive change in individual lives and in the quality of living for all. It is ultimately action oriented but requires serious dialogue and reflection to arrive at the best ways to influence positive change. The leadership philosophy promoted by the leadership-intensive transition courses stems from the Social Change Model for Leadership Development and looks specifically at leadership through the lens of consciousness of self, commitment, congruency, collaboration, common purpose, conflict with civility, and citizenship. Instructors in the HR 140 courses are resources for leadership activities for transition courses.

Liberal Studies All undergraduates must complete the liberal studies program, either by resident courses or transfer equivalents. The transition courses offer an excellent opportunity to underscore the importance of a liberal education and the need to expand intellectual skills such as critical thinking, oral and written communication, and analytical abilities. Transition courses should provide practice and reflection on the relationship between these skills and the academic and co-curricular development of our students. Transition courses are also a place for the liberal studies program requirements to be discussed in class. Professional advisors from the Advising Center are available to visit classes when discussing the Liberal Studies program.

Registration The registration process should be reviewed for all new students as part of their transition to the university. Students must meet with their primary advisor to review their degree plan before registering for classes each semester. Only after the advisor reviews and approves the plan is a PIN number issued which allows students access to online registration. Students who have declared a major meet with a departmental faculty advisor. Undeclared students meet with a professional advisor in the Advising Center. Advising Center staff are available to visit transition classes to discuss registration process and issues.

Responsible living and wellness This element incorporates four major areas: Holism (alignment of values and purpose, thinking critically and making wise choices in light of those values); Personal Responsibility (self-management, financial management, and priority/time management, including locus of control, attitude, self-discipline, goal-setting, decision making and problem solving); Healthy Lifestyles (proactive physical and mental/emotional health, including sexual responsibility, substance use, healthy computer use, exercise, good nutrition and the need for sufficient sleep, and Mental/emotional health, including recognizing depression, maintaining mental health (meds, reflection), managing emotions/emotional intelligence, stress management, identifying stressors, and internal script management); and Interdependence (the need for building relationships and developing interpersonal skills). There are several resources to assist with coverage of these topics, including staff at the Wellness Center, Counseling and Psychological Services, and the student-peer educator group CLAW (Campus Leaders Advocating Wellness).

Service Learning The transition courses present perfect opportunities to foster civic and community engagement and build connections to both the community and the university. Ties to the course concepts/themes and serious reflection on the experience are essential for service learning opportunities to be meaningful. The Center for Service Learning can assist in the development of class service learning experiences from small, one-time sample experiences to extensive class involvements throughout the semester.

Synthesis First year students should be introduced to the concept of synthesis as a critical learning concept that is central to the University's Quality Enhancement Plan. Transition courses are an excellent opportunity to model synthesis by integrating co-curricular experiences with academic activities in meaningful, reflective ways. Instructors should be mindful of discussions, assignments, and informal opportunities to prompt students to make connections from all aspects of their university experience.

Status check Instructors can quickly identify problematic issues if they begin class meetings by informally asking how students are doing, if they are encountering any special problems, or have concerns about any aspect of college life. Often the "status check" creates a brief discussion of university issues that are of immediate importance to all first-semester students. By allowing students to raise topics on an "as needed" basis, the students will be focused on the appropriate process to seek a solution.

Study skills The transition course should make students aware of proper academic preparation such as successful reading, organization, test taking, note taking, and memorization skills. Students can be referred to the Academic Success Centers for tutoring or workshops to support development of study skills. ASC staff can be invited to visit classes to elaborate on available services.

WebCat/Catamount Email WCU Students are required to use WebCat and the Catamount Email for electronic communication with the university. Faculty are encouraged to underscore this policy and implement it in transition classes.

Celebration Transition courses should help students celebrate becoming members of a new community, including:

Diversity An important aspect of university life is developing or enhancing students' appreciation for our diverse society. Transition courses present an opportunity for faculty to incorporate issues of diversity into the undergraduate experience. The Office of Multicultural Affairs is a resource for incorporating diversity into class activities.

Community Building An important part of a successful transition to college for any student is the degree to which he or she is a member of the college community. The transition course provides a way for students to become aware of their assimilation into the campus culture. Community building is also important in the classroom and faculty should find ways to encourage and foster its development.

Western Carolina University Even though all of the elements in this document reflect the transition to college life, the transition courses should help to foster pride in WCU in particular, and develop an awareness of Western's history and traditions.

The Region The location of the University offers an opportunity to foster an appreciation of Appalachian and Cherokee culture and the impact that location and the region have on students' college life and education.

World-view Transition course instructors should be sensitive to opportunities to develop a student's awareness of the scope of the world, one's place in that world, one's impact on the world at many levels (local, community, region, country, continent, planet). An appropriate way to help students develop or become aware of their world-view could include incorporating the first year reading assignment, Three Cups of Tea. Developing self-awareness of the larger world is the beginning of making sound decisions at all levels.

Strategies for Introducing the ASC to Your Class

The ASC Directors encourage instructors to introduce the ASC's services to their students early in the semester. Below are three activities that Transition Courses (e.g., USI 130 and 140, COUN 140) instructors can use to promote the ASC in their classes and to encourage meaningful participation by their students.

Although we want students to be familiar with our centers' locations, we prefer that instructors not bring their entire classes on ASC tours or assign scavenger hunt activities in which students are expected to collect various artifacts from each of the centers. We have found that class visits to the centers disrupt the tutoring experience for our clients, and participation in scavenger hunt activities is often difficult to verify.

Activity 1: Worksheet for Ensuring a Meaningful ASC Experience

Encouraging your students to use our centers for the reasons they were intended is the best possible option for familiarizing your students with the ASC. Use the following assignment if you need to verify their participation and encourage a meaningful experience. (A PDF version of this assignment will be coming soon to success.wcu.edu.)

Based on your classes this semester, identify an Academic Success Center that can help you with an assignment, with a test, or with your overall understanding of the course material.

Name of Center: _____ Visit Reason:

What do you hope to gain from this experience?

What information will be helpful for the tutor to know?

What did you do to prepare for this session?

What did you take with you to the session (a homework or paper assignment, a list of questions you had about the material, your textbook, your class notes, etc)?

What suggestions would you give to your fellow students to help them prepare for a successful visit to this center?

Activity 2: The ASC Virtual Tour

Take your students on a virtual tour of the ASC by visiting success.wcu.edu in class. You might consider asking your students to complete additional 'research' by visiting the individual Success Center Web sites.

Activity 3: The ASC Experience Workshop

Invite a representative from the centers to engage your students in an hour-long workshop designed to explore the Success Centers' Services. Contact Nory Prochaska (prochske@email.wcu.edu) to schedule this workshop. (The ASC Directors hope to produce a video version of this workshop that can be accessed from success.wcu.edu.)