

The Challenges of Pursuing Community Engagement: Addressing Faculty Concerns at Western Carolina University

Communiqué from the Office for Undergraduate Studies and the Center for Service Learning
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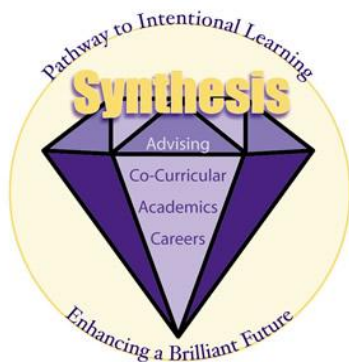
As we begin another Academic Year at WCU, we would like to take this opportunity to thank faculty and staff for your support and to offer some thoughts on continuing our pursuit of engagement with our communities in these challenging times.

“The aim is to imagine a [faculty] profession that is not so much narrowly circumscribed by teaching and learning with students in classrooms as one that is widely engaged—through scholarly, instructional, and outreach activities—in expansively teaching and leading us as institutions, communities, and a nation into a future of exciting possibilities.”

Gary Rhoades, General Secretary, AAUP

CONTEXT

The implementation of our Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) – “Synthesis: A Pathway to Intentional Learning” – is gathering momentum. Several academic programs/departments (Chemistry, History, Recreation Therapy, Health Information Administration, English, First Year Composition, Parks and Recreation Management, Health/Physical Education, Communication, the College of Fine and Performing Arts, Biology, Geosciences and Natural Resources Management, Political Science and Public Affairs) have participated in the original www.wcu.edu/12546.asp and several others have committed to begin pilots this year (Communication Science and Disorders, Computer Information Systems, and Nursing, to name a few). Additionally, two graduate programs (School Administration and Public Health) and several academic support programs (Western PEAKS and the Women’s Center from Student Affairs, and the Leadership Program) have also begun pilots. The QEP <<http://www.wcu.edu/12284.asp>>, which is designed to foster integrative learning, features *engagement* as a key component.



WCU’s approach to engagement <<http://www.wcu.edu/5179.asp>> focuses on *engaged learning* and *civic or community engagement*.

Engaged Learning: At WCU, we define engaged learning as the integration of purposeful academic and co-curricular activities to equip students with the intellectual and experiential skills necessary for success in life beyond college. Engaged learning incorporates teaching, learning, and scholarship by faculty, students, and community partners characterized by reciprocity and respectful exchange. Campus-wide programs that foster engaged learning include service learning, study abroad, internships, cooperative education, living-learning programs, and undergraduate research. These programs intentionally tie real-world experiences to rigorous classroom curricula.

Civic and Community Engagement: Civic and community engagement involve the alignment and application of University goals and resources to local and regional issues through the development of reciprocal, collaborative partnerships and exchanges. Extending beyond outreach, civic and community engagement include the exploration and application of knowledge, information, and resources. Mutual benefit between WCU and our community partners is an essential ingredient in successful community and civic engagement. The alignment between our institutional mission of outreach, faculty productivity and reward structures, and student learning experiences contributes to our designation as an engaged university by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

“Practice civic engagement” is one of the core behaviors (or outcomes) considered central to students’ development and is one of five core learning outcomes outlined in the QEP. Students may practice civic engagement in various ways. At WCU, many do so through their participation in service learning and the Public Policy Institute, as well as through their participation in many other academic and co-curricular programs.

CONCERNS

Many WCU faculty understand and appreciate the merits of engagement and have embraced the concept as evidenced in their exemplary work with their students <<http://www.wcu.edu/9152.asp>>. Some have been recognized for their efforts <<http://www.wcu.edu/5760.asp>>. However, a number of faculty members have expressed concern about the demands of engagement, especially at a time when University resources are increasingly scarce and faculty feel overburdened.

Distance to service sites and transportation costs are a long-standing issue. Time constraints pose a challenge not only for students but also for the faculty and community members who must supervise them. Now, faculty also are concerned that the “engagement” requirement will overload their students and simultaneously overtax community agencies. Furthermore, some course instructors are unwilling to assign community-based work to students in large classes. (Class sizes have increased in the wake of the current System-wide budget restrictions.)

RECOMMENDED APPROACHES

In addressing these concerns, it is important to note that there is no shortage of service sites or projects to support engagement. [The Center for Service Learning](http://www.wcu.edu/9815.asp) <<http://www.wcu.edu/9815.asp>> maintains partnerships with approximately 100 community agencies – community-based organizations, nongovernmental organizations, nonprofit agencies, local governments, and educational institutions – across the WNC region. Community partners provide service sites such as child-care centers, community centers, emergency shelters, family support service centers, food banks, hospitals and health centers, human service agency offices, nursing homes, parks and recreation departments, schools, small businesses, soup kitchens, thrift shops, and town/city halls.



We share below some approaches to the pursuit of community engagement in the context of the QEP. These are recommendations. Faculty may choose what works best in specific situations.

- ▶ Invite community agency representatives to class to explain the mission, goals, and programs of the agency as well as the service opportunities available to students. Bear in mind that it is necessary to build reciprocal relationships with the community agency personnel with whom your students will be working.
- ▶ Design group service-learning projects, rather than individual projects, as a way of dealing with transportation difficulties and also to decrease the anxiety that some students associate with venturing out into the community.
- ▶ Block out class time for the community visit (in the same way that an instructor would allocate time for completion of a lab assignment or for a visit to the Career Services Center). Alternatively, make plans for the entire class to meet on a Saturday or a Sunday afternoon to implement the community-based project.
- ▶ Urge students to take advantage of the Days of Service <<http://www.wcu.edu/10832.asp>> organized by (or with the support of) the Center for Service Learning. On Make a Difference Day (fourth Saturday of October), for example, projects take place in at least three counties, and transportation is provided.



- ▶ If appropriate to course goals, assign students to campus-based service sites (e.g., Kneedler Child Development Center and Ramsey Regional Activity Center) or sites/projects within walking distance (e.g., Auxiliary Services at NCCAT, Cullowhee Valley School, and CuRvE – Cullowhee Revitalization Endeavor). At the same time, please remind students that the CatTran is available to them, as is the Jackson County Transit.
- ▶ Assign community-based research, parts of which can be completed on campus. Preliminary work can be done using the Internet and telephone. Also, presentations of the findings may be made on campus to community partners.

▶ If appropriate, allow students to complete their service-learning assignments as part of the [Alternative Break Program](http://www.wcu.edu/11569.asp) <<http://www.wcu.edu/11569.asp>>.

▶ Pursue interdisciplinary work. In this regard, one community-based project can be used in two or three courses as long as there are different assignments, expectations, or outcomes/products for each course.

▶ Draw upon the resources available at the Center for Service Learning, including [Staff Members and Faculty Fellows](http://www.wcu.edu/9835.asp) <<http://www.wcu.edu/9835.asp>>.

The 2009-10 Faculty Fellows and Liaisons for Service Learning are:

Robert Anderson, Kimmel School
Jamel Anderson-Ruff, Education and Allied Professions
Marie Cochran, Fine and Performing Arts
Teri Domagalski, Business
Glenn Kastrinos, Health and Human Sciences
Jennifer Brown, Athletics
Steve Carlisle, Honors College
Jessica Shirley, Nursing, Enka Campus

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We recommend a creative approach to pursuing engagement as part of WCU's Quality Enhancement Plan. Challenges remain, but they are not insurmountable. Of course, we welcome feedback from faculty and will remain responsive to the concerns raised. Please do not hesitate to contact us with your questions/comments.

Thank you, and have a great semester!

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