**Your Time. Your Place. Your Choice. WCU Online.**

**Sue Grider, Martha Diede, Tony Miller, Heath Smathers, Laura Cruz**

## Executive Summary

WCU has consistently been ranked as one of the best universities for online learning in the state. We understand our learners and will meet their changing needs as they achieve their career and education goals through online courses and degree programs at WCU. In the Strategic Plan for WCU, under initiatives 1.6.7 and 1.6.8, our goal is to increase retention and graduation rates. In order to meet these goals, WCU will create an Online Support Center that will cater to the needs of all learners who take online and blended courses. Learners today include persons in the 18 – 22 age group *and* persons in the 22 – 70 age group. This later group is growing. Learners today juggle more than what we knew in the past. They have families, full-time jobs, school and many other commitments which do not permit them to participate in the traditional college format. In order to meet their needs, WCU will need to be able to support them in non-traditional ways and times.

It will remain imperative that the blended courses and online degree programs provide a robust educational experience where residential and distance learners apply what they learn in the work-place, in a new career, or toward a higher degree. The curricula of the online programs are nationally competitive and rigorous to encourage learners to reach for new knowledge. Our learners will appreciate a nimble online experience where they can set their own pace and have the flexibility to choose how they wish to complete their degrees. They will use the most current technology available to ensure success in their classes as well as their chosen career paths. WCU will create a strategic plan to further WCU’s 2020 Vision to expand our online presence (currently 20% of learners) and improve our retention and graduation rates.

## Introduction

The learners who are attending college today are different from students who attended college 10 or 20 years ago. Adult learners, for a wide variety of reasons, are coming to college to finish their degrees or returning to get a second or third degree to help with their career goals. The expectations of the learners today are also different from those of learners 10-20 years ago. The technology we have access to today did not exist. Many learners today expect that they will be able to have access to their courses and content upon demand at any time, in any location, using any device. The learners today expect that they will have greater flexibility in when they are able to do their work and how short or long they can take to get their work completed. Online and blended courses, programs and degrees are the answer to the education needs of the learners today.

In addition to the technology expectations, learners also want to be part of the institutional community although they may never set foot on the campus except for graduation. Avenues for joining the institutional community can be created by using social media tools, and maintaining these online relationships takes a certain amount of effort, which WCU is poised to offer. The online community of learners is a wonderful way for many to make personal and professional contacts which often are maintained long after graduation.

WCU is strategically positioned to embrace a greater footing in the online education arena. We currently have over 25 online programs with 1,945 learners engaged in their degree or certificate completion. With the proper administrative resources positioned to support our online programs and learners, we will be able to decide strategically what programs will be viable in the future for our learners.

By providing an Online Support Center with full support for our online and blended programs and learners, WCU will continue to support the region, the state and the nation. With state-of-the-art technology to enhance online and blended education, learners will be able to share and apply their prior knowledge and experiences with their peers and colleagues, thus building on our current QEP--synthesis.

## Discussion

In order for WCU to venture further into the realm of online teaching and learning, we need strategically to place ourselves in a position from which we can successfully achieve our goals. Because we are already successful, we want to build on that success. So, we will need to continue responding to our learners’ physical, administrative, and academic needs. Below are six goals that, if selected, will help WCU meet the needs of the learners in 2015 and 2020.

* Meet the learners where they are today.
* Provide centralized services for online learners.
* Provide a community of online learners.
* Provide learners with state-of-the-art technology.
* Provide flexibility in learning pace and place
* Develop a strategic plan for adding future online programs

### Learners Today

Learners who attend college today have expectations that they will have their administrative needs and academic needs met electronically so that they do not have to come to the WCU physical campus if they are unable to do so. Many of our learners today are working professionals with families. This means that their time is precious to them and that, if they are going to spend time and money getting a degree, it needs to help them achieve specific goals. Their administrative needs such as information requests, admissions, financial aid, registration, which extend through graduation, need to be dealt with as their schedules allow, day and night. The same holds true for accessing course content and submitting assignments. It is our job to ensure that our online learners are ready for the online education experience and that we are prepared to provide them the educational experiences that they seek. Thus, our courses must be easily navigable in form and rigorous in content. Still, the administrative aspects of participating in higher education must not interfere.

### Centralized Services

Having centralized services is vital to the success of our online learners. The more readily accessible the WCU services are to our learners, the more likely that the learners will continue at WCU and achieve their goal of earning a diploma. Busy adults who need not call one office after another will save time and frustration, and such centralized services will allow them to focus on their studies. This would function similarly to our current OneStop for our residential learners and would cater solely to our online learners.

Some learners may need some additional assistance from Military Student Services or Disability Services. We need to be completely accessible to our online learners as they progress through their selected programs. Establishing a centralized service point will help us to achieve that goal.

### A Community of Learners

Residential learners are thrust together into residence halls, dining halls, and face-to-face classes. They join clubs, go to sporting events, enjoy concerts together and are able to hang out together. They are automatically a community of learners because of their proximity to each other and interaction with each other. Online learners do not have this luxury. They often do not meet their peers until they are in their first course. The kind of relationships they are able to form depends upon the interactive tools and the activities that individual courses incorporate. Online learners need and long for communities similar to those that our residential learners have. However, online learners need accessibility to a community of learners that is authentic to their interests, locations, degree programs, etc. To assist online learners, then, we need to provide online events similar to those that we provide for our on-site learners. While the online experience is not exactly the same, moving to such a model can help us to take advantage of the fact that 62.2% of WCU students either “Somewhat agree(ed)” or “Strongly agree(ed)” that technology made them feel more connected to the University. (ECAR Study of Students & Technology, 2014). Supporting our online community of learners by forming online clubs, streaming concerts and sporting events for them to hear and engage in, and providing an online space where learners can meet, chat, and share their ideas and experiences and do homework will help to satisfy the desire for community.

### Technology Today

Technology today has changed our world. It has changed how news is reported, how we are involved in sporting events, and how we communicate with others within our immediate community and with people around the world. Thomas Friedman makes a point of this in *The World is Flat*. For our learners, this means that they can learn using the technology at their fingertips. Most of the learners at WCU today have at least two devices though which they stay engaged with their courses and communities. WCU is working to provide our learners with the technology that they need to stay connected. OneDrive through Office 365 allows learners to save and share their work with their peers and their instructors. Storage space identified specifically structured for research data is available. We invest in one of the best Learning Management Systems available today. Overall WCU rated between 2.3% to 5.4% higher in all categories relating to LMS for students being “Very satisfied”.  4.5% higher for being “Very satisfied” in overall Satisfaction (ECAR Study of Students & Technology, 2014). Our service providers, such as Banner, are adapting their structures to include different teaching and learning styles such as competency-based learning. (Competency-based learning allows students to progress through courses and programs by demonstrating competencies that meet learning outcomes.) This push in technology is part of WCU's drive to achieve strategic goals to ensure that we can meet the needs of our more traditional residential learners as well as those of our non-traditional online learners.

Our primary goal is to continue embracing the current technologies where appropriate and providing support to our learners when they need us. Technologically, Blackboard provides our learners support 24/7/365. Yet learners in the Middle East, South America, and across the United States need support for course technology as well as assistance with other software or hardware as they progress through their degree programs. Likely, support for administrative concerns such as financial aid will also be necessary.

### Flexible Learning

The learners who attend college today are increasingly working professionals who are trying to ensure that they will remain employed in careers about which they are passionate. These learners prioritize the ability to engage in the education when they have time. Many of these learners respond to demands from full-time jobs, multiple children and/or aging parents, spouses and many others. In order to meet their career goals, these learners realize that continuing education is essential. Moreover this education must fit within their other demands. This careful time negotiation also means that learners today want to be able to finish courses based upon their experiences and skills. So, if a learner is already working in accounting, then that learner will not have to spend 15 weeks hearing and learning about basic accounting—a subject that the learner already knows and has mastered. Rather, the learner would spend 2-3 weeks on such a subject and then have the flexibility to spend 15-30 or maybe 60 weeks learning higher level financial operations that may be more difficult. Essentially, we suggest a competency-based teaching and learning paradigm. Competency-based learning allows learners to engage in their education at their own paces. Once learners have mastered defined tasks, they either move on to the next tasks or to the next course. Research shows that this is an effective way for learners to complete their degrees in the time expected or less (Hope, 2015). This practice allows us to meet the goals of our strategic plan while meeting the goals of our online learners at WCU. Learners need flexible places to learn, flexible times when they can learn, and flexible programs for what they want or need to learn.

### Plan for the Future

For WCU to make these goals actionable and sustainable we will need a steering committee and a strategic budget to create a specific strategic plan. Research indicates that this is the best way to proceed (Rivenbark and Jacobson, 2014). We need to consider carefully what online programs we need to add to our current repertoire and what online programs may need to be cut. This process will be similar to our current program review and will take into consideration the needs of our future learners as well as the current markets in online programs. This process will ensure that our programs continue to meet the needs of our learners regionally, within the state, nationally, and internationally.

## Rationale

An Online Support Center gives WCU the opportunity to respond to the changing learning landscape, to maintain our current momentum, and to move in the direction of competency-based education that will meet our learners’ needs. Combining these two practices will help us to court and support these learners in a nontraditional way. We need to let our learners know that their needs and goals are important to us as an institution and that we want to partner with them as they complete their goals. Creating a strategic plan that will guide us through the process will help us to ensure that the programs offered are robust, timely, and student-friendly. We need to ensure that our learners are ready to meet their goals when we graduate them and that they are able to take the next steps in their lives. A WCU online OneStop can facilitate learners’ education that they can achieve quickly by applying the competencies that they already possess to their degree programs.

## Scope

Extending the current Synthesis QEP, this QEP includes a plan that supports the current 2020 Strategic plan and positions WCU to support the current online programs as well as to increase our online presence. This plan offers our online and blended learners the kind of experiences that they look for when they choose to expand their knowledge and experiences at an institution of higher education. The programs proposed here will not replace the face-to-face education that WCU offers but will provide a mechanism to all learners to complete their chosen degree programs at their own paces.

## Assessment

The components of this plan will be assessed administratively as well as academically. This data will be used by the steering committee to determine where adjustments need to be made in the plan as well as what programs will be added in the future.

## Calendar

This proposed plan will begin in the Fall 2016 and continue indefinitely. The steering committee will determine the details of the individual components for this timeline.

## References

Bates, R. (2013). Institutional Continuity and Distance Learning: A Symbiotic Relationship. *Online Journal Of Distance Learning Administration*, *16*(3),

Baxter, J. (2012). Who Am I and What Keeps Me Going? Profiling the Distance Learning Student in Higher Education. *International Review Of Research In Open And Distance Learning*, *13*(4), 107-129.

Cahill, J., Bowyer, J., & Murray, S. (2014). An Exploration of Undergraduate Students: Views on the Effectiveness of Academic and Pastoral Support. *Educational Research*, *56*(4), 398-411.

Chan, V. (2015). Implications of Key Performance Indicator Issues in Ontario Universities Explored. *Journal Of Higher Education Policy And Management*, *37*(1), 41-51.

ECAR Study of Students and Technology, 2014. Western Carolina University Benchmarking Report

Elliott, M., Rhoades, N., Jackson, C. M., & Mandernach, B. J. (2015). Professional Development: Designing Initiatives to Meet the Needs of Online Faculty. *Journal Of Educators Online*, *12*(1).

Fuller, J. S., Risner, M. E., Lowder, L., Hart, M., & Bachenheimer, B. (2014). Graduates&apos; Reflections on an Online Doctorate in Educational Technology. *Techtrends: Linking Research And Practice To Improve Learning*, *58*(4), 73-80.

Hardy, K., & Meyer-Griffith, K. (2012). Meeting Accreditation Requirements: Are You Serving Distance Learners?. *Journal Of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, *16*(5), 7-18.

Hope, J. (2015). Consider Structure, Advantages of Competency-Based Programs. *Recruiting and Retaining Adult Learners, 17*(7), 1-7. doi: 10.1002/nsr.30054

Hunte, S. (2012). First Time Online Learners' Perceptions of Support Services Provided. *Turkish Online Journal Of Distance Education*, *13*(2), 180-197.

Khan, R., & Gogos, A. (2013). Online Mentoring for Biotechnology Graduate Students: An Industry-Academia Partnership. *Journal Of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, *17*(1), 89-107.

Lewis, K. O., McVay-Dyche, J., Chen, H., & Seto, T. L. (2015). Examining Sense of Community among Medical Professionals in an Online Graduate Program. *Journal Of Educators Online*, *12*(1), 1-29.

Macfadyen, L. P., & Dawson, S. (2012). Numbers Are Not Enough. Why e-Learning Analytics Failed to Inform an Institutional Strategic Plan. *Educational Technology & Society*, *15*(3), 149-163.

Marcos, T. A., & Loose, W. V. (2014). iPrincipals: How a California University Educational Leadership Program Is Preparing the Next Generation of School Administrators Online. *Educational Leadership And Administration: Teaching And Program Development*, *25*92-102.

McCall, M. B. (2013). The Kentucky Community and Technical College System Learn on Demand Model. *Change: The Magazine Of Higher Learning*, *45*(3), 60-65.

Moore, J. C., & Shelton, K. (2013). Social and Student Engagement and Support: The Sloan-C Quality Scorecard for the Administration of Online Programs. *Journal Of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, *17*(1), 53-72.

Morgan, T., & Carey, S. (2009). From Open Content to Open Course Models: Increasing Access and Enabling Global Participation in Higher Education. *International Review Of Research In Open And Distance Learning*, *10*(5),

Nolan, K. (2013). Online Advising Pilot at the Community College of Vermont. *Journal Of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, *17*(1), 47-51.

Raspopovic, M., Jankulovic, A., Runic, J., & Lucic, V. (2014). Success Factors for e-Learning in a Developing Country: A Case Study of Serbia. *International Review Of Research In Open And Distance Learning*, *15*(3), 1-23.

Rivenbark, W. C., & Jacobson, W.S. (2014). Three Principles of Competency-Based Learning: Mission, Mission, Mission. *Journal of Public Affairs Education, 20*(2), 181-192.

Roberts, C. (2008). Implementing Educational Technology in Higher Education: A Strategic Approach. *Journal Of Educators Online*, *5*(1),

Sancho-Vinuesa, T., Escudero-Viladoms, N., & Masià, R. (2013). Continuous Activity with Immediate Feedback: A Good Strategy To Guarantee Student Engagement with The Course. *Open Learning*, *28*(1), 51-66. doi:10.1080/02680513.2013.776479

Sawyer, E. A., & Howard, C. (2007). Online Learning Program Strategic Planning and Execution: Considering Goals, Benefits, Problems and Communities of Practice. *Journal Of College Teaching & Learning*, *4*(8), 99-112.

Strycker, J. (2012). Developing an Online Support Community for Pre-Service Teachers at East Carolina University. *Techtrends: Linking Research And Practice To Improve Learning*, *56*(6), 22-26.

Sutton, R. (2014). Unlearning the Past: New Foundations for Online Student Retention. *Journal Of Educators Online*, *11*(3).

Thorell-Ekstrand, I. and Björvell, H. (1994), Preparedness for Clinical Nursing Education. *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences*, 8: 17–24. doi: 10.1111/j.1471-6712.1994.tb00218.x.

Vandenhouten, C., Gallagher-Lepak, S., Reilly, J., & Ralston-Berg, P. (2014). Collaboration in E-Learning: A Study Using the Flexible E-Learning Framework. *Online Learning*, *18*(3).

West, E., Jones, P., & Semon, S. (2012). Promoting Community for Online Learners in Special Education. *Journal Of Digital Learning In Teacher Education*, *28*(3), 108-116.

Willis, J., Davis, K., & Chaplin, S. (2013). Sociocultural Affordances of Online Peer Engagement. *Journal Of Learning Design*, *6*(1), 34-45.