



WCU's Next Adventure: A River Park on the Tuck

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Exciting things are happening at WCU. The current issue of *Western Carolina, the Magazine of Western Carolina University* features the article "[Outside Influence](#)" about the many ways in which WCU has gained long-overdue recognition as the premier adventure college in the Southeast and Mid-Atlantic region. Recent outdoor developments described in the article include the seven-mile multiuse trail on the West campus that has been praised by mountain bikers and a new Greenway trail along the Tuckasegee River that opened last year. The article highlights several WCU academic programs that capitalize on the natural resources of the region, programs that are bursting with more students than they can accommodate.

At the same time, the [University News](#) reports that "Base Camp Cullowhee has initiated a speaker series ... designed to complement and enhance WCU's [reputation as an epicenter of outdoor adventure](#)." The inaugural speaker in February was Mark Singleton, Executive Director of *American Whitewater*, a national non-profit organization based in Sylva whose mission is "to conserve and restore America's whitewater resources and to enhance opportunities to enjoy them safely."

This is all good stuff for WCU. With recognition of the value of the outdoors to the campus community, the time is right to look at other opportunities to grow WCU's adventure culture. One opportunity is right at WCU's back door on the Tuckasegee River where a local river park committee is planning a family river park. The River Park Committee, affiliated with the community not-for-profit [Cullowhee Revitalization Endeavor \(CuRvE\)](#) has been working for several years to investigate the potential to develop a river park below the Cullowhee dam. CuRvE envisions this as a place for fishing, wading, swimming, hiking, and paddling as well as a site for events, like fishing derbies and canoe races.

This area of the Tuck has already been the site of five annual canoe slalom races sponsored by WCU Parks and Recreation students, helped by the women's soccer team, Honors College and Base Camp Cullowhee. These fund-raising efforts enabled CuRvE to bring in an engineer to produce a plan for

the park. The park has the potential to stimulate economic growth – especially when linked to the Jackson County Greenway. CuRvE’s River Park Committee meets every month to push this project along.

However, community volunteers are not the only ones who think such an effort would be good for the growth of the town and university. CuRvE commissioned Syneva Economics of Waynesville to complete an economic impact study of the proposed park, with greenway and blue-way amenities along a 3.5 mile stretch of the river—from the Cullowhee dam down to the new access point at Locust Creek. The study found that these developments in the near term would add \$1.2 million of new annual spending in Jackson County. Other benefits include an increase in property values, increase in retention and attraction for residents, improved health, fitness and wellness and improved community cohesion.

In addition, the University’s Public Policy Institute conducted a survey of Western Carolina University students, faculty, and staff about interests in recreational activity. The survey focused on two major recreational activity groupings, one pertaining to water-based activities, and one to land-based activities. Each activity group is associated with the planned offerings of the Cullowhee River Corridor development; water-based activities to the river park, and land-based to greenways. The results indicated a high demand for activities offered by a river park and demonstrate that participants are willing to alter their behavior with the park’s improvements. In other words, improving recreational amenities would give students more outdoor areas in which to socialize, contributing to Western’s reputation as an outdoor university with a playful “backyard.” And giving students a place to stay and play would likely increase WCU’s student retention rates.

At this point, much of the work has taken the form of planning and conceptual design, but the groundwork has been laid. It would be good for the University to have an appealing “home” in Cullowhee, but think what it would be like for everyone—faculty, staff, students, locals, and “out-of-towners”—to have an inviting river park. It might just be a catalyst for improving downtown Cullowhee. Now, that would be good news for WCU.

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Editor's Note: The Faculty Forum is published and distributed on the third Monday of each month during the fall and spring semesters (except holidays). Please consider contributing to campus conversations with a lead commentary or a response. This is your last chance to write for the Forum this academic year, since the April issue will be the final one.

Lead Commentary. This is an essay written by a faculty member addressing an issue, hot topic, or project of interest to the general faculty. Send me your ideas for the next issue. And if you have a topic you'd like to write about in the fall, let me know.

Responses. These are faculty comments about and reactions to the previous months' FF. They are often substantive, even critical responses to the essay of the previous month. The **Responses** section is a great way to engage in discussion around campus.

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