



*Madison Hall in Spring on Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, NC campus.
Photo courtesy: WCU Facebook.com*

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A message from the HESA director

Greetings! There are exciting things happening in the Higher Education Student Affairs graduate degree program, beginning with our new name. Our program name was changed from College Student Personnel (CSP) to Higher Education Student Affairs (HESA) this past summer, as a result of the external review completed in spring 2014.

I am also pleased to announce that 13 new students entered the HESA program this fall, and the HESA faculty and staff are thrilled to be working with this cohort. Additionally, two of our dedicated students were 2015 award recipients—Adam Ray earned the Outstanding Graduate Student award, and Kelsey Woodford received the Graduate School Peer Service Award.

Other HESA student accomplishments include Megan Covington being selected to receive a highly competitive scholarship at the North Carolina College Personnel Association (NCCPA) 2015 Fall Conference at Elon University, and Cassie Spencer presented at the Southern Association for College Student Affairs (SACSA) conference held in Greenville, SC, with Dr. April Perry, HESA assistant professor. Complete stories on these students' accomplishments and more are featured inside this newsletter.

Speaking of Dr. April Perry, my colleague in the HESA program is featured in this newsletter. A well-liked faculty member and highly accomplished, April has been hard at work presenting and publishing. In 2015, she presented at the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), the SACSA annual conference, and has been accepted to present at the NASPA- Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education national conference in March 2016.

Lastly, with the help of the Alumni Office, our program is in the process of establishing an endowed scholarship—a first for the HESA graduate degree program. As you know, a scholarship endowment is an important guarantee of the continued excellence of all of our programs here at Western. These funds will help ensure that future generations of WCU students, including HESA, have resources available to reach their full potential through education. During this charitable season, won't you consider a donation to the HESA Endowed Scholarship? Complete details are in this newsletter.

I personally wish each and every one of you a happy holiday season and successful new year!



Adriel A. Hilton

Spencer presents at SACSA conference



Cassie Spencer

On November 1st, 2015, I attended the Southern Association for College Student Affairs (SACSA) conference held in Greenville, South Carolina. Dr. April Perry, HESA assistant professor, and I were given the opportunity to present our research on the importance of experiential learning entitled, *Helping Students Maximize Their Degree as a Competitive Tool: The Values of Experiential Learning*.

“Attending SACSA was more than just an opportunity to present research.”

Our talk looked at current market trends, recent graduate employment statistics, what employers look for in recent graduates and ended with a discussion on what Student Affairs professionals can do and are doing to make our students more competitive in the job market. The discussion between presenters and attendees provided valuable insight into what other institutions are doing to encourage experiential learning on their campuses, as well as what we are doing here at WCU.

I consider myself to be pretty comfortable speaking in front of groups and giving presentations, but a wave of nerves struck me as I watched the room fill with other Student Affairs professionals. It was comforting to not only have several fellow HESA (Higher Education Student Affairs) members in the audience, but to also realize that this was a unique opportunity that will help prepare me for the future. It was rewarding to present the research that Dr. April Perry and I had worked on to a group of Student Affairs professionals, who saw the importance and relevance of experiential learning in higher education.

Presenting at SACSA also gave me a vision of what my future in higher education and Student Affairs will look like. I was able to network with other Student Affairs professionals, attend other sessions and presentations, and gain valuable information that will be useful in my graduate assistantship, coursework, and future positions.

I strongly encourage HESA students to attend conferences like SACSA, regardless if you are presenting or not. These conferences are a great opportunity to meet other professionals and graduate students in our field, to learn about new initiatives or programs at other institutions, and to continue developing as a professional.

“The discussion between presenters and attendees provided valuable insight to what other institutions are doing to encourage experiential learning on their campuses as well as what we are doing here at WCU.”



HESA Director Adriel Hilton is pictured (left to right) with Cassie Spencer, Adam Ray, Dr. April Perry (HESA Assistant Professor), Megan Covington, Myranda Floyd, Terry Chavis, and Mr. Khambrel Ward (Director of Intercultural Affairs). The group attended the SACSA Conference held in Greenville, SC.

Graduate School Peer Service Awardee



Kelsey Woodford

As a Graduate Peer Service award recipient, I will have the opportunity to participate and assist with several graduate school-sponsored events throughout the year 2015-2016. These events include graduate school orientation, open house weekends, and the Three Minute Thesis competition, to name a few. The award allows me to network with fellow graduate students from a range of programs, as well as professionals at WCU, and to promote our graduate school.

At the beginning of the year, I helped facilitate our graduate school orientation. I was assigned my own group of students and some of my responsibilities included talking to them about what to expect in graduate school, the HESA program, adjusting to WCU, and escorting them around campus to meet and learn about all of the offices and support services available to us as graduate students.

The next Graduate Peer Service event which I assisted with was the Open House Weekend held in November. I published the HESA handout for this event, answered questions, and encouraged incoming students who are considering enrolling in a graduate program at WCU.

Students attend *Justice or Else!* movement in DC

On October 10, four first-year graduate students from the M.Ed. Higher Education Student Affairs program —Brandon Hepler, Brittany Cotton, Megan Covington, and Devan Lalas—and 50 other WCU students travelled to the Washington, DC National Mall to take part in a movement called, *Justice or Else*. The event was sponsored by the WCU Department of Intercultural Affairs.

Justice or Else fell on the 20th anniversary of the Million Man March, a historical gathering of African American men in Washington, DC on October 16, 1995. The march was intended to win politicians' attention for urban and minority issues. On that same day in 1995, there was a parallel event called the Day of Absence, organized by female leaders in conjunction with the Million Man March, to engage the large population of African-Americans who would not be able to attend the demonstration in Washington.

Before departing Cullowhee at the pretrip briefing session, the students went around the room and introduced themselves and said what they were hoping to achieve with this trip. Some of the responses included,

"...to be a part of something bigger than myself."

"I want to be able to tell my grandchildren I was a part of that!"

"I want to continue to fight for equity and justice."

Devan stated, "As graduate students studying the powerful educational role co-curricular experiences can have on their holistic development, I think we as cohorts would agree that this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity." He added, "One which inspired us, forced us to question our positions in life, and one which required us to be part of something much larger than ourselves. Truly an unforgettable and valuable educational experience."



HESA graduate students (left to right) Brandon Hepler, Brittany Cotton, Megan Covington, and Devan Lalas attended the *Justice or Else!* event October 10 in Washington, DC.

Justice or Else is the continuation of a movement to demand justice for African-Americans and other people of color, to demand the end of police brutality, to demand justice for indigenous Americans, for Mexican-Americans and Latinos, for the poor, the unjustly incarcerated, and veterans (Wikipedia.org).

Covington receives competitive scholarship



Megan Covington

Megan Covington, a graduate student in Higher Education Student Affairs (HESA), was recently selected to receive a highly competitive scholarship at the North Carolina College Personnel Association (NCCPA) Fall Conference October 29-30, 2015 at Elon University.

This year's conference was attended by graduate students, faculty and Student

Affairs professionals from across the state of North Carolina. The conference was held at Elon University in Elon, NC and included keynote speakers, as well as various educational sessions and networking events.

NCCPA demonstrates their commitment to providing conference attendees with cost-effective opportunities for professional development and relationship building. Each year, the NCCPA bestows scholarships, awards and grants to eligible students who are planning to attend the fall conference. This year was one of the most competitive for this scholarship, as over 400 applications were received and only four scholarships awarded.

To form the program presentation entitled, *Undergraduate Research as an Approach to Engaging Students*, Megan collaborated with Dr. Adriel Hilton, assistant professor and director of WCU's HESA program, and Dr. Ted Ogaldez, director of fellowships at Davidson College. Having significant experience with undergraduate research, Megan was excited about the topic. After intense brainstorming sessions, research, and composing a detailed program proposal, the group was elated to find out they were accepted to present at the conference mid-October.

Megan plans to continue working on this project. When her research is finished, she intends to submit it for publication.

NCCPA, a state chapter of ACPA-College Student Educators International, is committed to the education and development of post-secondary students in North Carolina and exists for the benefit of all student personnel professionals in the state.

Ray earns Outstanding Graduate Student award

Adam Ray, a second-year graduate student in the Higher Education Student Affairs (HESA) program, has been recognized for excellence within the program.

On October 30, the North Carolina College Personnel Association (NCCPA) presented Ray with the Outstanding Graduate Student Award for "demonstrating commitment to student development theory and institutional goals, and displaying an interest in continued professional development, conference presentations, in-service training and committee involvement."



Adam Ray

Last year, Ray was actively involved in publishing opportunities with Dr. Adriel Hilton, program director for the Higher Education Student Affairs program, related to motivational factors affecting retention rates among Black males attending historically Black colleges and universities in North Carolina. In addition, Ray worked closely with Dr. Lane Perry, director for the Center for Service Learning, on a quality enhancement plan for WCU in light of the reaccreditation process taking place this academic year.

Ray credits much of his academic success to the supportive mentors and colleagues he sees on a daily basis. Ray stated, "I have the privilege of working with some of the most supportive faculty and staff members I have ever encountered in higher education. These individuals challenge me to pursue my passions and immerse myself in the diverse field of higher education."

Education payoff: Transitioning from grad school to director of housing



Mark Jestel

My name is Mark Jestel, and I am the Director of Residential Education at Piedmont College. It has been two years since completing my M.Ed. in the College Student Personnel program (now called the Higher Education Student Affairs (HESA) program) at Western Carolina University, and I know I would not be where I am today without this educational experience.

While at WCU, I served as an Assistant Resident Director for a first-year building (Buchanan Hall), a Graduate Community Coordinator for an upper-level building (Central Drive Hall), and also held internships in a student union (The Cat's Den), taught a college leadership course on masculinity (Band of Brothers), and held an ACUHO-I internship at Stetson University for one summer.

Going directly from my graduate program to being a Director of Housing is a rare and unique experience, one which I think sets me apart from many of my peers. In my new position, I will have the opportunity to build a

“By taking my experiences and modifying them to fit within Piedmont, I have been able to build a unique program with confidence.”

department from the ground up, which is an exciting challenge. Transitioning from WCU to Piedmont is an exciting ride that I am proud of and enjoy sharing what I've learned thus far.

- First and foremost, it is important to realize that you will never be perfect in any position when you first begin. My first year serving as director, I felt as though I was always asking for help when I got stuck. Don't be afraid to rely on your coworkers for support while you are trying to figure everything out.
- No two schools are the same. In the beginning, it is important to be as flexible as possible and learn how your institution works. Take some time to observe and learn about the politics, policies, and history of your school. Even the student population will be different. Get to know the students on an individual level and learn what their wants and needs are to get a better understanding of how you can do the most effective and efficient job possible.
- As new professionals, we perform tasks based on what we know. One of the best things Western's College Student Personnel program offered me was an interactive experiential learning experience where I could build my current program from the knowledge I learned as a Catamount. During one of my staff meetings, my Residential Director called me out on using the phrase "At Western we did..." too many times. Although Western will always hold a very special place in my heart and was my home for two years, it is important to take what I learned and combine it with my current institution. By taking my experiences and modifying them to fit in Piedmont, I have been able to build a unique program with confidence.
- One of the toughest transitions I had to overcome was getting respect. The combination of my age, being new at Piedmont, and creating a new housing department from scratch, not many of the professionals were familiar with my duties and responsibilities. Many times they thought I was a senior Residential Director or still an undergraduate student. It was important for me to change my appearance internally and externally—updating my professional wardrobe to create a strong display of confidence when talking with other faculty and staff members, developing a sturdy handshake and eye contact, recognizing some of the frequently asked questions and have an immediate answer on hand to show knowledgeability.
- For example, I am often asked how many residential students are on campus. Instead of just saying, 650; I answered in more of a professional way: "Currently our residential student population is 650. With the new Student Village being brought online this semester, however, I'm excited to have 800 students once we reach maximum capacity." Although this information may seem unnecessary because it wasn't requested, it shows initiative and innovation and a look toward the future.

Even though I am in my second year as director, I am still transitioning in many ways. I am still learning how to be an effective supervisor, a lot about assessment, and about the inner workings of Piedmont College. That being said, I firmly believe that Western's CSP program has made my transition smoother in the long run. From everything I have learned at WCU, I knew it was possible for me to jump into a director position with confidence. Transitioning to Piedmont has been an exciting ride, and I am excited to see where it leads.

“...I firmly believe that Western's CSP program has made my transition smoother in the long run.”

Dr. April Perry: A scholarly update



Dr. April Perry

My first two years as a tenure-track faculty member at WCU have been one fantastic ride. From tears of joy to tears of worry and sadness, I have experienced so much. Despite the time-consuming and incredibly challenging nature of this work, I truly believe I have found my life calling. I am humbled and grateful to be able to work at place and with people who let me continually learn how to become a better version of myself, while also helping others do the same. That being said, Dr. Adriel Hilton has asked me to provide an update on some of the scholarly work and projects I am currently doing. Please read below for details.

For my doctoral research, I conducted a qualitative study (semi-structured interviews for six consecutive months) with 20 individuals who had graduated from college (with a bachelor's degree) earlier that year to explore and illuminate their experiences and perspectives on the post-university transition. The aim of this research, in addition to better understanding the phenomenon at hand, was to seek strategies and implications for institutions of higher education that may better prepare and support graduating students during their transition out of college (career-readiness, emotional support, life skills, etc.). To learn more about my research, please click [here](#).

It has been five years since I collected the data for my PhD research, and I am now in the midst of conducting a follow-up study (qualitative interviews) with the original research participants. My hope is that this will be the first step in collecting data for a longitudinal study on graduates and their transition out of college.

“...I have been able to take the findings from my studies to intentionally design a course curriculum to better prepare the students in my HESA classes...”

My research findings directly inform my teaching within the HESA (Higher Education Student Affairs) program at Western Carolina University. For example, I have been able to take the findings from my studies to intentionally design a course curriculum to better prepare the students in my HESA classes for their lives and transition into the Student Affairs profession.

Because my research is so ingrained with career preparation and institutional initiatives around support for the career transition, I have partnered with a second-year HESA student, Cassie Spencer, who is doing her Graduate Assistantship in the Office of Career Services. Together, we have written a manuscript entitled “Helping students maximize their degree as a competitive tool: The value of experiential learning,” and we have been accepted for publication in the *William and Mary Educational Review* (Spring 2016 issue). Subsequently, we recently presented this paper at the *Southern Association for College Student Administrators (SACSA)* annual conference. Furthermore, we have been accepted to present on a similar topic at the *NASPA- Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education* national conference in March 2016.

Regarding publications, in addition to what is listed above, I have framed my research through the conceptual lens of service-learning and have written a manuscript co-authored by Dr. Lane Perry entitled “Final-year transition and service-learning: Working together as a vehicle for student engagement, development, and life preparedness” that has been accepted for publication in the *International Journal of Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement* (Fall 2015 issue). This paper has also been accepted for presentation at the *NASPA- Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education* national conference.

It is well understood that research is often “me search.” Based on my interest in researching identity development and transitions, and in effort to make sense of my own life experiences, I am also in the midst of a study about faculty transitions, and specifically the one I find myself in now – from practitioner to tenure-track faculty. Along with two colleagues, Dr. Shannon Dean (Texas State University) and Dr. Adriel Hilton (Western Carolina University), we are conducting qualitative research informed by auto-ethnographic methodology. We recently presented our research at *Association for the Study of Higher Education* national conference, and we are currently comprising a manuscript for the *Journal for the Study of Postsecondary and Tertiary Education*.

I also have the pleasure of serving on two journal editorial boards; one for the *NASPA Journal About Women in Higher Education*, and the other for the *Journal of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*.

From students and colleagues to my family and friends, I have felt a great deal of challenge and support within these first two years of serving as a faculty member. I do not know what the future holds for me, but if I were to estimate, I hope to spend the rest of my career in a faculty role within a Higher Education graduate program. Although this work is challenging, through teaching, research, and service, I find it incredible valuable – both intrinsically and extrinsically. My life motto is: “the only thing better than watching someone grow is helping them grow,” and through this career, I believe I get to be a part of that process every day. So thank you, CSP graduates and current HESA students, for being on this learning journey with me. I am honored.

Dr. Varga: Alumni Spotlight



Dr. Mary Alice (Snead) Varga graduated from the WCU College Student Personnel program in 2008. She then went on to obtain her PhD in educational psychology and research from the University of Tennessee in Knoxville and is currently a tenure-track professor of educational research at the University of West Georgia. She teaches graduate-level courses on quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research designs and also directs and serves on doctoral dissertation committees. Her research focuses on college student bereavement – how death and losses affect the collegiate experience.

Prior to becoming faculty, Dr. Varga worked in housing at Shenandoah University and in undergraduate admissions at the University of Tennessee. During her time at WCU, she also worked in housing as an Assistant Resident Director of Norton Hall, a Graduate Assistant for the Student Services Center, and an intern for the Catamount Academic Tutoring Center. She also completed an internship at Southwestern Community College, where she also taught first year experience courses.

Dr. Varga currently lives in Atlanta, GA with her husband, Matt, their new daughter, Ramsey Elizabeth, and their two puppies, Charles Bass and Gracie Belle.

The Impact of an Endowed Scholarship: Megan's Story

Did you know that the Higher Education Student Affairs (HESA) M.Ed program at Western Carolina University (WCU) is the only program in the College of Education and Allied Professions without an endowed scholarship?

A scholarship endowment is an important guarantee of the continued excellence of the HESA M.Ed. program. These funds will help ensure that future generations of WCU HESA students have resources available to reach their full potential and have a positive impact on the college campus.

Here's the story of current WCU HESA student, Megan Covington:

I am Megan Covington, originally from Virginia Beach, VA. Before enrolling in the HESA graduate program at WCU, I earned a B.A. in Psychology, with a minor in Child Development and Family Studies, from North Carolina A&T. I then went directly into a doctoral program at Purdue University to study Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS), which was fully funded. However, after meeting and talking with Dr. Hilton, I realized I was very interested in switching from HDFS and transferring to WCU's HESA graduate program.

To be honest, I didn't know much about the program. Nor do I think many others understand what HESA is—the fact that people actually study how to help students develop into successful college students and how much thought and planning goes into making the college campus an environment conducive for all types of learners. I wish more undergraduate students knew what goes into each extracurricular event, tutoring program, student

health and welfare resources, the fraternity or sorority experience, or any other affair or service outside of the classroom at the university.

I don't regret my decision to transfer to Western, but a scholarship would have made my transition easier. With rent, a car payment, student debt and other expenses, a scholarship would help alleviate the need for more loans. In order to get the job and salary I want, I need more education, and that education has a price—which I must pay.

This is my first semester, and I'm taking four classes (versus three) with the hope of graduating next fall. It's a great experience, so far. Drs. Hilton and Perry set a great dynamic for the program, and I enjoy the interaction with other students, faculty and administration. I feel I've already grown so much already through the course content.

I hope to return to a doctoral program, with the intention of eventually becoming faculty and researching ways to improve the college campus climate for underrepresented minorities. Who knows, maybe someday my path will even lead to a position as an HBCU president. It's good to have goals!

In order to help students like Megan, we need your help.

We are calling on all HESA alumni to contribute a meaningful gift, in any amount, as we strive to create the first ever HESA Scholarship Endowment.

Our gifts will be pooled together as we strive to reach the minimum endowment level of \$25,000.

We encourage you to consider making an easy recurring gift by credit card that can be made monthly or a one-time stretch gift today at makeagift.wcu.edu or call toll free 800-492-8496.

Please select "Your gift. Your choice." under the gift designation area, and search for HESA in the search bar at the top, selecting the HESA Endowed Scholarship.

For more information, please contact Jamie Raynor, Director of Development, at 828-227-3052 or jtraynor@wcu.edu.



Photo courtesy of *The Reporter* (2009, September 8)

Please direct all comments and questions regarding this newsletter to:

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