

## ENRICH THE TOTAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE

- I. Universities must produce educated and active citizens for the survival of our democracy. This objective requires a total student experience that provides students with opportunities for challenging and fulfilling curricular and co-curricular experiences, as well as an environment on campus that fosters personal growth and development.

A primary concern is the potential for restricted budgets to compromise the academic student experience by minimizing opportunities for direct interaction between faculty and students. We recognize the value of faculty-student interaction, along with all substantive student mentoring associated with faculty, staff, and/or peers. Pride in self, the institution, and place are important when considering an enriching total student experience. Other important factors essential to the educational enterprise are active citizenship, a vibrant campus climate, sustainability, global awareness, campus diversity, and local/regional collaboration and engagement. The goals and initiatives that follow aim to enhance the total student experience at WCU.

- II. **Goal #1:** WCU students will be challenged and supported in environments that foster academic excellence, personal growth, networking opportunities, and global and social awareness.

**Rationale:** WCU's dedicated faculty and staff and unique natural environment help make each student's educational experience distinctive. Specifically, our institution mentors its students well and engages them in meaningful dialogues about their personal and professional development. Thus, rigorous academic standards and a supportive, diverse learning environment must be created, protected, and enhanced

**Initiative 1.1:** Develop a means for coordinating academic support and experiential learning services in order to ensure that these units provide consistent, interconnected assistance to students.

**Initiative 1.2:** Develop and/or formalize mentoring program(s) which (in addition to existing cultural programs and wellness initiatives) help students develop a sense of personal, intellectual, and professional identity and understand/accept the perspectives of others.

**Initiative 1.3:** Create leadership, stewardship and participatory opportunities for students at the local, regional, and international level and encourage/require students to demonstrate or document how all their learning experiences are interconnected.

**Goal #2:** WCU will foster active citizenship by inspiring and empowering students to make a difference.

**Rationale:** As a member of the UNC system WCU is committed to working towards the best interests of the state and its citizens. Integral to our educational mission, it is incumbent on us to deliberately and consciously consider what it means to educate citizens. This consideration should encompass both curricular and co-curricular elements that serve to prepare our students to become graduates who are equipped to perform their role as active citizens involved in creating a better region, state, nation, and world.

These initiatives must be considered as partnerships and objectives for faculty, staff, and community networks as well, because civic literacy and involvement cannot emerge in a vacuum or in isolation. These initiatives are organized by three levels in which students can develop as active citizens as they integrate information and experiences: 1) Campus communities, 2) Campus and local/regional community, 3) Community beyond the 'border' – (i.e. state, nation, global).

**Initiative 2.1:** Increase the role and participation of students on decision making committees as appropriate to promote transparency, campus connections, and civic engagement.

**Initiative 2.2:** Implement support structures (logistical and administrative) to increase the number of (Academic & Living) Learning Communities that integrate active, collaborative, and interdisciplinary learning experiences with curricular goals.

**Initiative 2.3:** Develop student leadership outreach projects that focus on issues related to social justice and civic literacy and involvement (i.e. knowledge and values).

**Initiative 2.4:** Integrate the elements of the "Student Community Creed" into institutionally affiliated programs and services.

**Goal #3:** WCU will collaborate with community and regional partners to encourage a thriving, sustainable Cullowhee that will augment work and recreation opportunities in and around the campus.

**Rationale:** As UNC-Tomorrow and WCU's QEP indicate, students, faculty, and staff need to engage with the region in a variety of ways. Cullowhee is of special importance. However, other critical communities or areas include Asheville, Cherokee, Highlands, and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Engagement with Cullowhee and the region will enable students to understand the *content* of socio-political and environmental issues, their *context*, and the *process* of their resolution. Though facilitated by faculty and staff, student engagement with the region must be student led. Successful student engagement with Cullowhee and the region will be indicated by the vitality of student undergraduate research, service learning, Learning Communities, internship, and student-centered activities/recreation.

**Initiative 3.1:** To augment opportunities for students to deepen their knowledge of their chosen academic discipline, synthesize a variety of disciplines, and gain a greater understanding of civic responsibility, academic departments will connect to local agencies and initiatives.

**Initiative 3.2:** Academic departments in coordination with the Division of Student Affairs will focus on local and regional environmental, economic, and social sustainability as an important theme in relation to Initiative 2.1 (above). In particular, WCU will provide adequate resources to foster programs that promote the responsible management of natural resources so that economic, social, and environmental needs (local and global) are addressed throughout the institution.

**Initiative 3.3:** WCU will collaborate with local and regional entities to support the development of the county greenway and the Lena Davis Landing river park via the design and construction of a campus lighted, multi-use trail that connects to “Old Cullowhee” and the Tuckasegee River.

**Initiative 3.4:** WCU will enhance campus-funded transportation to enable students to access education sites and to explore and engage with local and regional points of interest and businesses.

**Goal #4:** WCU will instill pride in the university through more visible recognition and celebration of institutional achievement and traditions while embracing local and regional culture, beauty and experiences.

**Rationale:** Western Carolina University has enjoyed many historical and current successes. We should go beyond acknowledging the programs and people that achieve distinction and become an institution that visibly celebrates all of our achievements. Western has important traditions that should be maintained, and adding an increased emphasis on campus wide celebrations will make the university more attractive, energized, and joyful.

**Initiative 4.1:** Develop an annual program to recognize and celebrate outstanding students, alumni, faculty, staff, and leaders from our region.

**Initiative 4.2:** With our regional partners, create programs that enhance pride in our academic achievement, institutional traditions, and diverse cultures that surround the university.

**Initiative 4.3:** Increase the visibility of WCU by building a championship athletics program that excites and instills pride among students, faculty, staff, alumni and friends of the university.

### **III. Conclusion**

The quality of the academic environment, its impact on the total student experience and the need for WCU to graduate informed and involved citizens are the highest priorities for this strategic direction. As recently experienced, and anticipated over the life of this strategic plan, there are uncertainties pertaining to funding, administrative mandates, and strategic transitions that could, without proper preparation and efficiencies, impact WCU's ability to provide a quality student experience focused on learning. Since learning is either stated or implied in our missions, this is our top priority. The related initiatives reflect the concern for engagement, mentoring, coordinated academic support and diverse leadership, stewardship and participatory opportunities. The next priority considers the demand for WCU to produce students who are knowledgeable and participatory citizens prepared to engage in local, regional, national, and international activities, as well as being good stewards of limited natural resources. The related initiatives promote increasing student roles in campus decision-making processes, pursuing greater integration of the Student Community Creed into programs and services, and supporting the need for a more "sustainability sensitive" campus culture. Additional goals focus on the concepts of "sense of place" and "sense of pride." The associated initiatives are intended to better connect the student with the surrounding environment and better bond the student to Western Carolina University through knowledge, experience and pride.