



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

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Creating Connections: Applied Learning in a Public Setting The Mountain Heritage Center As a Resource for Applied Learning

The Mountain Heritage Center is one of many campus resources that can assist faculty in providing our students with transformative learning experiences outside the classroom. The Center has welcomed university classes and individual members of the university community to its programs and exhibits for almost three decades. Thousands of Western students have learned about our region through the Mountain Heritage Center. This is not surprising—enriching our students' educational experience is an important component of the Center's mission. But our mission is much broader. The Center studies, documents, and interprets the natural and cultural heritage of the southern Appalachian region. We collect artifacts, conduct oral history interviews, create traveling and virtual exhibits, and host craft demonstrations and musical performances. We also prepare educational materials for K-12 teachers, produce books and musical recordings, and provide museum services to the western counties of North Carolina.

This service to the region adds breadth to our mission; it also creates many more learning opportunities for Western students. While most students experience our public face as spectators, there are other students and faculty members assisting behind the scenes in the design, creation, and execution of Center projects. Five recent examples illustrate the variety of activities and learning experiences our students can find at the Mountain Heritage Center:

- A biology student proposed a small exhibit on herbariums as an independent study project. Working closely with her professor and Center staff, she researched, designed, and created a display for the Center.
- Two Graphic Arts classes designed and implemented project logos for two of the Center's educational traveling trunks. These students also designed and created mailing materials and the trunks' exteriors. The students gained the experience of working with a client from the design phase through completion of the project.
- The History Department's Local History class conducted oral history research, artifact analysis, and museum and website development for a project you can view at <http://www.wcu.edu/mhc/npl/index.htm>. They also assisted with the "After the War" exhibit, on display through spring semester 2007.
- A Parks and Recreation Department class conducted research for a planned exhibit on historic and contemporary outdoor recreation in the mountains. This is a long-term project—the next phase of it has just started with the following example:

- This fall we are collaborating with the “Adventure Sports in the Mountains” Learning Community. Through our partnership with instructors in Sociology and USI 130 and the staff of Base Camp Cullowhee, students will conduct research and create materials for use in our ongoing project on outdoor recreation in western North Carolina.

In each of the above examples, students applied knowledge gained in their classes to serve an outside client—the Center. They learned to meet deadlines, meet a client’s project criteria, and stay within budget. Most had to organize the material they had learned for a public presentation—often in a variety of media. All of these students have a significant project to include on their resumé, in a professional portfolio, or as part of a graduate school application.

We are currently planning projects with faculty in a variety of departments, including: Art, Anthropology, Biology, Chemistry, Education, Engineering, English, History, Mathematics, Psychology, Sociology, and USI 130. We also co-sponsor programs with the Cherokee Studies Program, the Parris Distinguished Professor in Appalachian Cultural Studies, and Western’s Ethnography Laboratory and have partnered with Hunter Library, the university’s Special Collections, and the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching on a variety of special projects.

We are also offering a September 27th workshop on creating digital exhibits. Digital exhibits have several advantages. For faculty they may be modified to fit within the workload and time constraints of a three-hour course. They allow the Center to increase our offerings with minimal impact on current exhibits and storage space. They also lend themselves to specific class requirements more readily than a traditional museum exhibit. If you are interested in how to design a digital exhibit, please contact the Coulter Faculty Center.

The Center has worked with many undergraduate and graduate interns over the years. We are currently revising our internship program to include more professional development activities. While we unfortunately cannot offer paid internships, we are dedicated to providing our students with a quality internship experience in all other respects. We have also assisted Western interns working at other institutions, such as the Cashiers Historical Society, Canton’s town museum, and the Historic Monteith House of Dillsboro.

I and the other staff of the Mountain Heritage Center would like to discuss any ideas you have for possible collaborative projects. Please contact us at 227-7129, or email me at philyaw@email.wcu.edu. Of course, you are also welcome just to visit the center, located on the ground floor of the Administration building. You will discover the rich traditions of the mountains, see the Appalachian region from new perspectives, and come away with an enhanced understanding of its land, culture, and people.

Scott Philyaw, Director, Mountain Heritage Center, Associate Professor of History

The opinions printed here belong solely to the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the editorial staff or of the Faculty Center. If you would like to respond, e-mail Nienhuis by the 8th of the month.

Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Response to "Creating Connections: Applied Learning in a Public Setting, The Mountain Heritage Center As a Resource for Applied Learning," by Scott Philyaw, 9/1/06

When I first came to WCU as an untenured assistant professor eight years ago, I was strongly encouraged to attend a series of new faculty orientation sessions. The one speaker who stood out for me from those sessions was Gael Graham, who shared some impressions of her years as a faculty member at WCU. As I remember it, she said that WCU was an institution where faculty could put their creativity to use and be involved in the growth and development of the university. Her words led me to think about ways that I could help make WCU better. Perhaps, given her audience (and, it must be said, recent university initiatives), she was being overly optimistic about the role that faculty play in the growth of this university. Still, in my own experience, the unit of this university where faculty members are most closely involved in the ongoing creation of "Western Carolina University" (with the exception of the Faculty Center, of course!) is the Mountain Heritage Center. In recent years, faculty and their students have been directly involved in organizing and creating displays, exhibits, workshops, lectures, performances and just about anything else that you can think of having to do with "the mountains." It has been one of the great pleasures of my professional life to work with such a committed group of competent, enthusiastic and good-hearted people. They produce what I think are amazing results on a very limited budget. Their shared faith in the spirit of creativity, grounded in this special place, makes it happen. Hopefully, WCU will also share this spirit as we work to build a new economy in a region that all of us can call "home."

Philip E. (Ted) Coyle, Anthropology and Sociology