

Engaging Students for Success In a Global Society

A Quality Enhancement Plan for
Western Kentucky University

Draft Summary - 17 August 2004



Since its inception in 1906, Western Kentucky University has been defined by a desire to positively and personally impact the lives of its students. Western faculty and staff place the highest premium on providing opportunities for students to succeed, both in their coursework and beyond. Individual faculty, units and divisions have been highly successful at providing opportunities for growth within their respective areas. Our undergraduates routinely gain distinction as research scholars, creative artists, athletes and entrepreneurs. Among our alumni, Western can point to educators, physicians, and public servants of the highest reputation.

This student-driven focus is evident in the university's mission statement and strategic planning process. Western's mission statement identifies our principal objective: "preparing students to be productive citizens of a global society..." Central to this mission are a set of core values, which include "encouragement of meaningful and active partnerships among students, faculty, staff and constituents to strengthen the learning environment" and "commitment to providing a collegiate experience that prepares students to be informed, engaged, and dedicated citizens." The strategic plan commits the university to increasing student learning through activities which include setting specific targets for "curricular and [co-] curricular involvement that increase students' global understanding" and "student engagement in activities that enhance education (e.g., internships, leadership experiences, community service, undergraduate research, cultural events)." There can be no doubt that the Western model places a high premium on experiential opportunities for learning and self-exploration.

While much has been done, it is now time to build on our successes and take the next step in the process. We must establish a more exact institutional awareness of what we hope to achieve with respect to student learning, and how our activities are complementary to that objective. In our view, the Quality Enhancement Plan provides the logical thematic framework for continued growth of the institution and the university community at large. Besides addressing our goal of enhancing student learning in a systematic manner, adopting a common perspective will help foster a strengthened university culture and increased appreciation for the intrinsic value of higher education. But what should that common theme be?

Western long ago adopted Henry Hardin Cherry's aphorism that "*The Spirit Makes the Master.*" Nevertheless, it remains unclear to many exactly what defines the *Spirit* of which Cherry spoke. Cherry was correct that achieving mastery of one's career and life was more than just acquiring vocational training or a set of tangible accomplishments; he knew that true success involved a significant intangible component. It is time for Western to identify a clear sense of the *Spirit* we hope to cultivate in our students and in ourselves, and to place this vision in a modern, practical context.

To that end, we cast Cherry's *Spirit* in terms of engagement. If we can cultivate a pattern of meaningful engagement in our students, we will imbue them with the *Spirit* that will enable them to become true masters of themselves, their professions and their place in society. This in turn will propel a continuing trend of enhanced quality among our graduates and advancement of the university's reputation as an institution focused on student learning and subsequent achievement.

The goal of this plan is to stimulate a systems change at Western. We do not set out to simply establish new policy or impose additional burdens on faculty and staff; rather, we hope to recognize and promote those many things we already do well, and build upon those strengths to help us improve further. By directing a process of self-reflection organized around a common theme, we hope to enable faculty and staff to work better, not harder, and at the same time harness the energy, resources and opportunities available throughout the university community to catalyze the continuous enhancement of educational quality. To that end, we define our mission around the tripartite theme of **Engaging Students for Success in a Global Society.**

"...to be a live school and to impart to [our] students a burning zeal to do and be something."

Henry Hardin Cherry

Some Definitions

What do we mean by engagement ?

Engagement is the process by which we will achieve our objective of enhancing educational quality at Western. By systematically engaging students in meaningful ways, we can elevate the value of a Western education, as well as our ability to deliver that education in ways that are relevant to the goals and expectations of each student. At the same time, through engagement we can help students develop a sense of their obligations as educated citizens, and the role of their subject disciplines in modern society. We see engagement as a means by which students can cultivate in themselves a perspective that will serve them throughout their lives.

To our way of thinking, engagement stems from knowledge, sustained commitment, and ultimately passion for learning, aesthetics or service on behalf of a cause. The nature of engagement will vary among individuals; however, the common feature is that meaningful engagement is transformative, opening minds and doors to success.

How do we recognize meaningful engagement ?

We must not restrict our thinking of engagement as the exclusive purview of academic training, student life programming, or the world beyond the gates of campus. Engagement involves all of these and more. The challenge is to organize these disparate aspects of engagement around a shared vision of that which is embodied in Cherry's *Spirit* and in the **Western Experience**. Meaningful engagement in the sense we intend:

- (1) Allows students to step outside traditional boundaries of their experience.
- (2) Encourages personal exploration, professional skills and broadens students' worldview.
- (3) Has the potential to be transformative in the lives of students.

What do we mean by success ?

Student success is the outcome we will use to judge our effectiveness. The more students are actively engaged in and by a liberal educational experience, the richer their learning will be and the greater their potential to contribute to society in positive ways. If students can place their academic training and co-curricular activities within the broader context of the world of which they are a part, this will enhance their ability to be personally and professionally successful in that environment. Thus, in defining success, we must consider the full range of intellectual, professional and personal advantages derived by students during as part of their **Western Experience**. We can view students as successful if they have developed the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors that allow them to become productive citizens in a global society.

What do we mean by a global society ?

The global nature of modern society and the challenges we face on a daily basis form the requisite context in which our plan resides. Being a productive citizen requires each of us to confront and appreciate diverse opinions and multifactorial questions. As with engagement and success, there is not a single definition of global to which we can point or orient our actions. Diversity obviously has a spatial component; however, we must also recognize that a diversity of opinions and people can and should exist within a single community. Likewise, we know that the most vexing personal, professional and societal problems we encounter are so challenging because they require solutions that synthesize information from various disciplines and perspectives. The conceptual thread running through these examples is that a global society is integrative.

What role do I play in this process ?

Western's mission statement identifies our principal objective: "preparing students to be productive citizens of a global society..." Responsibility for fulfilling this mission reaches beyond academics to encompass student life and the institutional support systems that, when implemented well, allow learning to occur. Every individual, unit and constituency associated with the university community through their actions contributes directly to student learning. Therefore, we must each consciously assess and improve the manner in which we facilitate the type of participatory and engaged learning Western has long practiced but which we strive to further enhance.

A key aspect of moving forward is accepting the element of risk. True value lies in those activities that allow individuals or units to extend themselves beyond the status quo, and with that carry an inherent risk of failure. We must establish a university culture and operational system that explicitly rewards individuals and units for acting in ways that embrace change, without being reckless. Likewise, we must establish the mindset among students, faculty, and staff that willingness to accept some risk is expected and, conversely, that avoiding risk is disadvantageous.

Why are we doing this ?

The impetus for codifying Western's mission around a common theme manifest in a Quality Enhancement Plan stems from the upcoming SACS reaccreditation process. Beyond this, such proactive documents can serve as significant organizational tools if developed and implemented correctly. Philosophically, the chosen QEP theme of **Engaging Students for Success in a Global Society** directly addresses what universities have done for a thousand years - contribute to the development of educated citizens prepared and willing to contribute to the various communities of which they come to be a part.

A Taxonomy of Student Engagement

Engagement is not one thing, but many. Meaningful engagement activities encompass academic activities, independent scholarship, service learning and personal exploration. Diverse in form but consistent in function, meaningful engagement activities inspire students to become active contributors to their own learning, and to take responsibility for their own education, personal and professional growth. Our role as faculty and staff is to promote and facilitate engagement and leadership opportunities relevant to our particular disciplines and areas of focus, including:

Activities conducted within the context of a course and during class time

Soliciting questions and active discussion as a learning tool
Requiring team projects and/or presentations by students
Including diverse perspectives in class discussions
Providing academic challenges that stimulate critical thinking, analysis and application of concepts, and communication skills
Utilizing a variety of teaching techniques to promote learning
Incorporating a variety of student assessment tools to evaluate the learning process

Activities conducted within the context of a course but outside of class

Requiring written assignments necessitating multiple drafts
Assigning papers or projects that integrate ideas or information from multiple sources or disciplines
Students working with others to prepare class assignments
Students tutoring or teaching others in the course
Including participation in community-based projects as part of the course
Students and faculty engaging in ongoing discussion of course-related issues
Students using the Internet to investigate particular aspects of other cultures

Activities not related to a specific course but related to vocational preparation

Students working on independent research or creative projects under the direction of a faculty member
Students participating in a culminating senior experience
Participating in study abroad programs
Students tutoring or teaching others in the students' discipline
Active involvement in career planning and preparation

Activities not necessarily related to specific courses nor to vocational preparation

Interaction of students and faculty/staff on departmental or university committees and student life activities
Participation in community service or volunteer work
Involvement in learning communities or cohort programs

Experiential learning activities

Practicum or clinical assignments
Internship or cooperative education programs
Field experiences

Social engagement activities

Involvement in campus or community organizations
Contribution to campus publications and media outlets
Participation in student government or other leadership activities
Involvement in fraternities or sororities
Participation in intercollegiate or intramural athletics or competitions

Intellectual and cultural engagement activities

Student led conversations with individuals of different races or ethnicities
Reflective interactions among students holding different religious beliefs, political opinions or personal values
Immersion in cultures different from one's own
Attending cultural performances including lectures, concerts, theater, or museum shows
Discussion among student, faculty and staff about music, arts, philosophical issues or public affairs

Civic engagement activities

Involvement in initiatives relevant to the community or society at large
Active participation in projects aimed to promote social or political change
Students seeking the opportunity to have their voices heard in a public forum
Students developing the capacity for leadership
Working as a volunteer, lending time and skills to assist others



Confluence of cultures. Bradley Smith (Class of '06) and Ben Hutchins (Class of '05) in Narok, Kenya, July 2004. Photo by Cheryl Kirby-Stokes.

How Do We Get There ?

In developing a specific path for the university to follow, we must balance the desire for intentionality with the need to permit flexibility. The foremost priority is to actively engage students in their own learning, applying that learning to community and world issues. Such engagement is intentional, reflective, linked to learning outcomes, and integrated within program quality criteria. We intend to achieve this objective by supporting significant initiatives related to the following three specific outcomes:

Outcome 1: Increase student learning through engagement in intellectual, social, cultural and leadership activities.

- A. Cultivate a participatory learning environment in our courses and curricula, especially as it advances development of integrative thought processes and students' appreciation for a diversity of viewpoints.
- B. Increase opportunities for student/faculty collaborative scholarly activity and service learning in all disciplines.
- C. Design curricular and co-curricular experiences to meet the specific needs of and promote a pattern of engagement in students from their first semester onward.
- D. Capitalize on Western's residential nature, integrating curricular and co-curricular experiences into the living and learning environment while broadening the spectrum of cultural and civic opportunities available on campus.

Outcome 2: Build capacity within faculty and staff to facilitate student engagement and experiential learning.

- A. Develop an academic advising process that equips faculty with the tools to effectively assist and prepare students to assume increasing responsibility for their academic program, professional and personal development as they advance.
- B. Provide training for faculty and staff in methodologies for engaging students in their courses and beyond.

Outcome 3: Institutionalize and support the mission of Engaging Students for Success in a Global Society.

- A. Dedicate sufficient institutional resources to maximize our potential for success.
- B. Promote and reward individuals, units and activities that engage students with their disciplines, their community and the world.
- C. Foster a technology environment that promotes innovations in pedagogy, facilitates collaboration, expands the reach of Western students beyond their physical locale, and provides engagement opportunities to those otherwise excluded by place or time.
- D. Provide mechanisms for information dissemination that support the curriculum and scholarly needs of the faculty and students and ensure awareness of the resources.
- E. Foster a campus services and support infrastructure that removes barriers to engagement activities.

The Quality Enhancement Plan is built on a discrete timeline with clear internal benchmarks. Progress towards meeting specific outcomes will continually be assessed using discrete, quantifiable indicators. Yet we must also judge our overall success at creating the institutional transformation we desire. This requires a vision for Western's future that builds on its rich traditions and significant accomplishments thus far. In this context, our vision will be fulfilled if students and parents, faculty and staff, alumni and friends, peers and colleagues, and the community at large see Western as:

A place where engaged learning inspires academic excellence and social responsibility.



Photo by John Andersland

What Will it Take ?

Administrative
Leadership
Academic
Creativity
Infrastructure
That
Facilitates
Change
A Dynamic
Campus
Environment
A Sense of
Social
Obligation
Alumni and
Community
Support
Intentionality



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