



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

DegreePlus, Furthering Student Development Through Intentional Extracurricular Involvement

Western Carolina University

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DegreePlus is a tangible expression of Western Carolina University's (WCU) commitment to "be a national model for student learning and engagement that embraces its responsibilities as a regionally engaged university." (WCU Vision) National studies report that employers find graduates often lack transferable skills, even when they are proficient in their academic disciplines (National Association for College and Employers, August 1, 2017). DegreePlus is designed to bridge this gap by providing students unique opportunities to build these skills. The QEP engages students through extracurricular activities that help them develop four transferable skills (Professionalism, Cultural Responsiveness, Leadership, Teamwork) to enhance their academic learning and position them to compete and thrive in the workplace and other post-graduate opportunities.

The development of DegreePlus included wide cross-disciplinary representation and involvement from many University stakeholders: faculty, staff, students, alumni, and community partners. Its placement within the Center for Career and Professional Development, which is in the Division of Undergraduate Studies in Academic Affairs, reflects the QEP's strategic connection with both academic and career development.

Through its three-level incentivized program, the student learning outcomes (SLOs) for each skill guide the learning trajectory.

- Level 1 – *Experience and Exposure* – students attend five extracurricular activities that deliver one or more SLOs related to a DegreePlus skill. These "DegreePlus-tagged" events are offered by colleges, departments, and student organizations and may be existing programs or newly developed events.
- Level 2 - *Reflection and Articulation* – students meet with faculty and staff DegreePlus mentors on DegreePlus Day to discuss and connect their event participation with the SLOs for a DegreePlus skill. They then communicate what they learned in reflection papers which are evaluated by their mentors.
- Level 3 – *Integration and Application* – students develop capstone projects based on a DegreePlus skill. They may use internships, employment, study abroad, service work, academic projects, or creative initiatives to showcase the skill and its application. They present these projects to fellow students on DegreePlus Day. The projects and presentations are evaluated by the DegreePlus mentors and others.

Students have autonomy in their participation. They may start and stop at any time and at any level, pacing their involvement to accommodate their academic and other obligations. To incentivize their participation, students earn rewards at each level, such as giveaways, transcript notations, business cards, and financial support. DegreePlus also inspires students to develop experiential transcripts to represent their DegreePlus involvement and other learning outside the classroom.

DegreePlus assessment occurs at each of the three levels. Level 1 – event attendance is tracked and post-event surveys are reviewed to determine if students are being effectively introduced to the SLOs for the skills; Level 2 - students' reflection papers are evaluated on how well they connect the SLOs with both their experiences at the DegreePlus-tagged events and their personal and professional development; Level 3 - students' capstone projects and presentations are evaluated on how successfully they demonstrate the integration and application of the DegreePlus skills. Beginning in the pilot year (2017-18), an advisory group of faculty, staff, and students will assist the Associate Director of DegreePlus in reviewing the assessment results to refine and improve the QEP and guide its continuous improvement for the future.