

IGNITE First-Year Experience Program: Find Your Spark

University of North Carolina Asheville

Dr. Caitlin Brez, Assistant Professor of Psychology and Co-Director (cbrez@unca.edu)
**Alex Hollifield, Associate Director of Leadership Education and Development and QEP
Co-Director (ahollif1@unca.edu)**

Executive Summary

UNC Asheville's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) is titled "IGNITE: Finding Your Spark." Students participating in IGNITE build skills and academic confidence while building meaningful connections to the community on and off campus. IGNITE accomplished this by engaging incoming first year students in a structured, peer-led, cohort experience in which Peer Advising Leaders (PALs) facilitate structured conversations topics such as interpersonal skill development, growth mindset, intercultural dialogue, and introductory career education.

This project is aligned with UNC Asheville's core values of diversity and inclusion, innovation, and sustainability as well as with key strategic priorities from the institution's Revitalization Plan, specifically to evolve and innovate institutional culture and student support. The project grows out of broad-based campus concern about alarming declines in first-to-second year student retention at UNC Asheville.

IGNITE has two different anchor points for each semester of the first year. In the Fall semester, the core element is peer-led class meetings which guide first year students through a series of sessions focused on helping them "find their spark" and ignite their passion for UNC Asheville and their own growth and development. The IGNITE sessions are embedded in each First Year Seminar course and introduce students to concepts of leadership development and self-discovery. In the Spring, IGNITE continues as an optional, peer-led experience, inviting students to participate in a 1-credit hour course to explore and become involved in experiential learning opportunities across campus and in the surrounding community.

Centering peer-to-peer connections and community engagement in our QEP addresses not only the desire for a stronger sense of community expressed by stakeholders across campus but aligns with the literature on student success as a strategy to increase students' sense of belonging as well their competence and confidence in navigating their journey at UNC Asheville. Additionally, in increasing our intentional support for peer-to-peer relationships, we are significantly increasing and strengthening the rich relationships across campus without significantly increasing workload on a pandemic-strained faculty and staff. Similarly, engaging upper-level students in this paid work increases our capacity to offer on-campus employment which literature also shows to have positive retention outcomes for students.