2024–25

HONORING OUR PROMISE

ANNUAL REPORT

Western Carolina University

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FROM THE CHANCELLOR

In June 2021, the Board of Trustees approved the *Honoring Our Promise* strategic plan, establishing a clear roadmap for Western Carolina University's continued success. This plan reaffirms WCU's longstanding commitment to Western North Carolina and highlights the university's vital role in driving economic and social prosperity across the region, the State, and beyond. This annual report showcases the accomplishments and progress made toward the plan's goals and initiatives, reflecting the innovation, resilience, and excellence demonstrated by our students, faculty, and staff over the past year.

I remain deeply thankful for our dedicated faculty and staff, whose hard work and commitment continue to drive progress toward our goals and create meaningful impact in our community and region. Some of this year's highlights include:

- **Record-Breaking Philanthropy**: The Fill the Western Sky Campaign has seen monumental success, with the campaign goal increased from $75M to $100M. This follows the largest fundraising year in university history in FY24 ($35.8M) and the third-largest year in FY25, which recorded over $19.5M in commitments.
- **Hurricane Helene Response and Research**: In the wake of Hurricane Helene, the WCU community demonstrated remarkable resilience. The Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning supported 36 community outreach activities, including supply and blood drives. The university also committed nearly $200,000 from internal funds and NC Collaboratory Grants for faculty-led research projects focused on storm impact, recovery, and community resilience.
- **Advancing Academic Programs**: WCU continues to innovate its academic offerings to meet regional workforce demands. This year saw the launch of a new B.S. in Mechanical Engineering, a fully online MBA program, and several new certificates, including an Interprofessional Certificate in Autism. The Master's-entry prelicensure program in nursing is also set to enroll its first cohort in Spring 2026, pending final approval.
- **Commitment to Employee Retention and Success**: The university allocated $1.3 million in campus-based funding in FY25 to address labor market, equity, and retention concerns for employees. This is in addition to the 3% state-mandated legislative increase. As a result, 98% of faculty salaries are now at or above the 35th percentile, a significant increase from 64.3% in 2021.

- **Growth in Sponsored Research**: WCU faculty and staff received 70 sponsored research awards totaling nearly $10.3 million, a 49% increase in funding from the prior year. This external funding provided $1.8 million in faculty salary support and $2 million in educational awards and wages for students.
- **Strategic Budget Reallocation**: Through a university-wide strategic resource allocation exercise, WCU identified $5.2 million to be reallocated to address inflationary pressures and other critical needs. This was achieved through measures such as improved contract pricing, efficiencies in hiring, and reallocating positions to better meet student demand.
- **Expanding Regional Access in Asheville**: WCU expanded its instructional site in Biltmore Park by 12,000 square feet. The expansion includes additional classroom and support spaces and will allow for the future addition of high-fidelity simulation labs for healthcare degrees, which are expected to be online by the end of the 2026 academic year.
- **Athletic Excellence and Catamount Pride**: Catamount Athletics created excitement and pride with a highly successful year. The soccer team won its second consecutive Southern Conference Championship, and seven athletic teams finished in the top three of the conference. Meanwhile, construction is underway on the new Western Skybox project at E.J. Whitmire Stadium.
- **Increased Global Engagement**: WCU expanded experiences for global awareness, with a 15% increase in study abroad participation compared to two years prior. The university also sponsored 210 international students from 53 countries and, through its new Passport Services office, distributed more than 600 U.S. passports to students, faculty, staff, and community members.
- **Improving Student Retention**: Through initiatives like the restructuring of advising, new student success programs, and the Catamount Commitment scholarship, WCU achieved its strongest first-year retention rate since the COVID-19 pandemic.

This past year's accomplishments are a powerful reminder of what we can achieve together. I'm honored to continue supporting our dedicated faculty, staff, students, and the communities we serve.

Sincerely,

Kelli R. Brown
Chancellor

Strategic Direction 1:
Academic Excellence

Accomplishment Highlights

- **Launch of High-Demand Academic Programs:** To meet evolving workforce needs, the university launched several new programs, including a B.S. in Mechanical Engineering, an online MBA, and a B.A. in World Languages. New post-baccalaureate certificates in Entrepreneurship, Inclusive Education, and Innovation Leadership were also created, alongside a new minor in neuroscience.
- **Commitment to Continuous Improvement:** Across the university, 118 academic programs engaged in analyzing student learning outcomes, achieving an impressive 98% response rate for continuous improvement reporting. The data is used to highlight program strengths and identify curricular changes to enhance the student educational experience.
- **Growth in Experiential Learning:** Students registered for over 9,000 hours of internship, co-op, or student teaching courses. The Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning (CCESL) approved 101 community-engaged course sections, involving 1,692 students taught by 58 different instructors.
- **Record Support for Graduate Students:** The Graduate School allocated over $2.58 million for assistantships in 2024-2025, a 12% increase from the previous year, guaranteeing a minimum wage of $15 per hour. Additionally, the Graduate School awarded $409,100 in tuition remissions and over $198,000 in excellence scholarships.
- **Expanding Global Opportunities:** Study abroad participation saw an 8% increase from the prior year, with 214 students traveling to destinations like Japan, Ecuador, and Spain. The new WCU Passport Services office, launched in February 2024, has already distributed over 600 U.S. passports to the campus and local community.
- **Investing in Research and Scholarship:** The university invested significantly in scholarly activity, awarding $159,906 in Provost Scholarly Development Awards and committing $100,000 to Hurricane Helene-related research. The annual Research and Scholarship Conference (RASC) featured 231 students and 335 faculty members.
- **Strengthening Transfer Pathways:** To support transfer students, the Advising Center created 111 new transfer guides for North Carolina Community College students. WCU also introduced the Catamount Commitment and Western PTK Scholars programs to provide new scholarship opportunities for incoming transfer students.
- **Enhancing Summer Session:** To eliminate barriers and increase access, the university updated its policies and practices for summer session. Strategies were developed to use summer to improve retention and four-year graduation rates, and funds were allocated to the Summer Accelerator Grants to offset costs for students with financial need.

STRATEGIC DIRECTION 1: Academic Excellence

We commit to providing our students with a 21st century rigorous curriculum that is composed of the intellectual, creative, cultural, and personal outcomes necessary to advance and excel.

GOAL 1.1: High-Quality Educational Programs

Deliver high-quality educational programs that enhance students' intellectual, creative, personal, and social development and prepare them for career fields as well as to advance and excel as 21st century citizens.

Strategic Initiatives	Summary of results to date
1.1.1: Ensure and promote relevant, high-quality undergraduate and graduate degree programs by implementing ongoing reviews and instituting curricular and program improvements based on WCU's standards for academic programs. Academic programs include on-campus, off-campus, online, and international degree programs.	Over the past year, 118 academic programs across the university gathered and analyzed data relating to student learning outcomes for the purpose of 1) highlighting their program's strengths, and 2) identifying curricular or program changes that might inform improvements in the student educational experience. The academic program response rate for continuous improvement reporting was an impressive 98%. Our Liberal Studies courses undergo a similar quality improvement process, with faculty submitting for analysis completed student work aligned with program-level student learning outcomes. This year, the Liberal Studies program collected approximate 2,400 assignments aligned with the Awareness of Self, Inquiry, and Critical Thinking outcomes. The resulting evaluation of that work, as well as detailed formative feedback on assignment design, is shared each year with the Liberal Studies program, department heads, and participating faculty. The Office of Institutional Assessment also facilitated comprehensive program reviews for three academic programs - Integrated Health Sciences (BS), Communication (BS), and Anthropology (BA/BS).
1.1.2: Identify, pursue, and promote opportunities for new and revised academic programs of quality, relevance, and sustainable demand with the capacity, resources, and ability to grow enrollment.	The Master's-entry prelicensure program is set to kick off pending approval from the NC Board of Nursing with the first cohort expected to enroll in Spring 2026. The School of Engineering & Technology has launched a new BS degree in Mechanical Engineering, which had previously been a concentration embedded within their general degree program. A BA in World Languages will also begin in Fall 2025. The program replaces the BA in Spanish, allowing students to focus on one or more languages including Spanish, German, and Japanese. The MBA will now be offered fully online, and several new online post-baccalaureate certificates were also created: Entrepreneurship, Inclusive Education, Innovation Leadership, and an Interprofessional Certificate in Autism. A new minor in neuroscience was also developed. Finally, several degree programs shifted curriculum to improve opportunities for students. The BS in Biology now has an ABM path. The EdD in Educational Leadership consolidated concentrations for efficiency, while the Film and Television Production BFA added concentrations to emphasize specific career paths. Lastly, the BS in Engineering now offers a new industrial engineering concentration.
1.1.3: Incentivize and support programs and courses that include cross-curricular, interdisciplinary, and experiential learning.	Added 9 new UG courses to the inventory of qualifying courses. Twelve new programs, minors, concentrations or certificate were initiated including a degree in BS in Mechanical Engineering, a concentration in Industrial Engineering, a minor in Neuroscience, additional pathways in the MS in Nursing program, and several certificates in health and in education. Students registered for over 9,00 hours of internship, coop, or student teaching courses.

	CCESL approved 101 community-engaged course sections across all six colleges and representing 28 different departments/programs during the 2024-25 academic year. Student participants in these courses numbered 1,692 individuals, taught by 58 unique course instructors. Seven Civil Dialogue programs, providing a structured opportunity for students and community members to gain skills in discussing topics such as affordable housing and free speech. In total, 84 attendees participated in CCESL's Civil Dialogue program.
1.1.4: Expand experiences that enhance a global awareness and cultural understanding among WCU students and promote integration of international components into existing and new curricula.	In 2024-25, WCU continues to contribute towards achievement of strategic initiative 1.1.4, which expands experiences that enhance a global awareness and cultural understanding among WCU students and promotes integration of international components into existing and new curricula. <u>Study Abroad</u> - 214 students participated in sponsored study abroad programming. - 8% increase from the prior year and a 15% increase from 2022-23 - Top destinations include Japan, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Honduras & Spain <u>International Students and Scholars</u> - Sponsored 210 international students including 15 Optional Practical Training (OPT) - 14.8% increase from last year (183 in total for 2023-24) - 53 countries Represented - Top Countries: Canada, Japan, Nigeria, South Korea & Spain <u>International Collaboration</u> - 47 bilateral university partners who can send and receive exchange students - Members of important global consortia including Global E3 (Engineering Educational Exchange) and International Student Exchange Program (ISEP). <u>WCU Passport Services</u> (Launched in February 2024) - More than 600 US passports distributed this past year - Increasing mobility for students, faculty, staff and community
1.1.5: Expand educational programming around academic integrity and truth seeking to promote a culture of (student) academic honesty.	Activities were noted by the College of Engineering and College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. ENG 199 courses (3 sections serving 73 students) included engineering ethics. In CLAS, Chemistry (CHEM 495 and CHEM 696) and Physics (PHYS 130) courses worked this year on copyright, fair use, and the ethical use of generative AI. Faculty in these departments collaborated with Hunter Library to provide this instruction.
1.1.6: Coordinate, integrate, and highlight WCU's learning goals and co-curricular outcomes into curricular and co-curricular experiences.	WCU's institutional outcomes are reflected within its Strategic Plan, and those outcomes integrate and coordinate with curricular and cocurricular experiences in many of the university's undergraduate programs. The Office of Institutional Assessment identified all programmatic student learning outcomes aligned with five strategic directions within the Strategic Plan (1.3.1, 1.3.2, 2.1.1,2.3.2, 14.3) and found that 16% of student learning outcomes align with WCU's broader institutional goals of at least one of the following: 1) engaging in the local region, 2) building a culture of service, 3) interdisciplinary learning, 4) fostering civil discourse, and 5) promoting student engagement in high impact practices such as undergraduate research, internships, and study abroad. As a 'culture of service' example, for instance, one of the Athletic Training, M.S. outcome's states that "students will serve the community by participating in volunteer activities." This is just one example of many in terms of the integration of institutional outcomes within the university's curricular experiences.

	Goal 1.2 - Teaching Excellence Promote teaching excellence as the successful engagement of our students in learning, experimenting, creating, and achieving their full potential.	
	Strategic Initiatives	**Summary of results to date**
	1.2.1: Enhance faculty professional development opportunities with a focus on a pedagogical approach and curriculum design that engage students through high-impact learning and evidence-based practices.	Analysis Polls: 285 students reached, 226 participated; 11 instructors engaged in mid-semester feedback to enhance teaching. - 1:1 Consultations: 174 faculty supported in course design, pedagogy, and professional development. - New Faculty Orientation: 40 new faculty introduced to WCU resources & community. - Faculty Forward: 16 early-career faculty built teaching confidence through 8-session seminar. - Excellence in Teaching & Learning Event: 25 attended this AI-focused event co-hosted with Hunter Library. - Summer Institute: 51 faculty explored innovative teaching under the theme, A Renaissance of Teaching. - Online Course Template Sessions: 42 faculty trained across 16 sessions for consistent online course design. - Excellence in Online Teaching: 61 faculty enhanced online engagement via asynchronous modules. - OSCQR Reviews: 6 faculty received detailed online course quality feedback. - School of Teaching and Learning FLC & Design Institute: 30 faculty explored and designed research-based teaching projects. - Faculty Mentoring: 7 mentees supported by 2 mentors and a fellow over 10 sessions. - Reading Group: 9 explored teaching during/after disasters. - Custom Workshops: 80+ participants.
	1.2.2: Update departmental collegial review documents to align with university policies on engaging students, innovative teaching, advising, scholarship of teaching and learning, and support of our community and region.	This year, there were no changes to policy regarding student engagement, innovative teaching, advising, scholarship of teaching and learning, or community/region support. However, Department Collegial Review Documents (DCRDs) were updated for all units this year to account for several internal policy changes that promote faculty success. The first was an update to include the new system-directed faculty workload policy. This included a declaration of departmental norms for workload and the addition of an annual faculty workload plan. The second was an update to revise the post-tenure review policy and procedures. Some changes to the review outcomes were made, and DCRDs now reflect the need for faculty to submit a long-term work plan following promotion, achievement of tenure, or a post-tenure review cycle.
	1.2.3: Recognize, promote, and celebrate outstanding programs, faculty, staff, and students that contribute to 1) teaching, research, and service; 2) the promotion of diversity, equity, and inclusion; 3) leadership roles; 4) service to the regional community; 5) advising/mentoring; 6) demonstration of ethical decision-making; or 7) innovative idea or program implementation.	UNC BOG Award for Excellence in Teaching; CDTA Award; Star Staff Award; Bright Idea Staff Award; Judy H. Dowell Outstanding Support Staff Award; Paul A. Reid Distinguished Service Award; University Scholar Award ; Excellence in Teaching Liberal Studies Award; Innovative Scholarship Award; Excellence in Community Engagement Award ; Student Nominated Faculty of the Year Award; Program of Excellence Award - Academic Program & Administrative Program; Scholarly Development Assignment Program; CAS BOG Teaching Award; COB BOG Creative & Innovative Teaching Award; CEAP BOG Award for Superior Teaching Award ; CET BOG Distinguished Teaching Award; BCFPA BOG Teaching Award; CHHS BOG Innovative Teaching Award; Provost's Scholarship Development Award Hunter Library-Hunter Scholar Award; Graduate School & Research-Million Dollar Circle Award. Fulbright Scholar award. In 2024, the 2023 Issue of Imagine Magazine placed first in the National Collegiate Honors Council Publications Contest. Collaborative Appointment at the National Renewable Energy Lab for the '25-26 AY. 2025: Faculty/student awards. The Senior Leadership Program hosted an advanced curriculum option with 36 campus leaders are participating. Two employees attended UNC Executive Leadership Institute. 70 grants totaling $10,299,571.

Goal 1.3 Cultural, Environmental, Economic, And Regional Development Promote and enhance cultural, environmental, economic, and regional development through educational programs, scholarship/creative activity, and service.	
Strategic Initiatives	**Summary of results to date**
1.3.1: Provide learning opportunities for students to engage in the natural landscape and cultural heritage of the Southern Appalachian region.	The History Department and Natural Resources Program, in collaboration with WCU's Mountain Heritage Center and Cherokee Center, advanced this goal through immersive, place-based learning rooted in regional heritage and ecology. Students conducted original research contributing to MHC exhibits and public programming. Community outreach and internships supported partners such as the John C. Campbell Folk School and Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual Inc., and over 2,000 K-12 students. Hands-on fieldwork in 19 natural resources courses took students into national forests, parks, and conservation lands, leveraging WCU's location in one of the most biologically diverse temperate regions. Projects included ecosystem assessments, forest management, wildlife/fisheries surveys, and riparian restoration monitoring. The History Department hosted the 50th anniversary of the Tuckasegee Valley Historical Review, a Cherokee Studies Alumni Roundtable, and a Careers in Public History networking event. Cherokee Studies was enriched through Rock Your Mocs and the Cherokee Language Symposium, reinforcing WCU's commitment to cultural preservation and community engagement through multidisciplinary lenses.
1.3.2: Continue building a campus culture of service; one that focuses on community engagement, is broadly available, and maintains high rates of student participation that is inclusive, thus positioning WCU as a leader in the state, region, and nationally.	The Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning (CCESL) launched a new community-engaged course designation (Community Experience Course) in spring 2025. This resulted in 36 course sections receiving this designation. Combined with 65 approved service-learning course sections, there were 101 community-engaged course sections across all colleges and from 28 different departments/programs. A total of 1,692 students participated, taught by 58 unique course instructors. Students logged 9,661 service hours in Engage. CCESL processed 30 requests for the free use of CCESL vehicles for civic education or community service activities. CCESL also promoted volunteer service opportunities or events for 25+ community partners through 281 event postings in Engage. The Center for Career and Professional Development (CCPD) managed 287 interns working in the community this year. In addition, thirty majors offered direct internship courses totaling 650 internships for undergraduates with an additional eight graduate majors with 96 internships completed
1.3.3: Enhance, incentivize, and highlight scholarship, research, teaching, creative inquiry, and cultural activity that contribute to regional/community development that positively impact North Carolina or the Western North Carolina region.	WCU continues to recognize and support excellence in research, scholarship, and creative inquiry. In 2024-2025, 231 students and 335 faculty participated in the Research and Scholarship Conference (RASC), which for the first time included a faculty poster session, which primarily featured research and scholarly contributions from faculty in the College of Health & Human Sciences. The university invested $45,472 in undergraduate research support. ORA offered proposal development sessions, shared funding opportunities, and provided monthly reports to colleges with real-time and 3-year average data. The provost awarded $159,906 in PSDA internal grants, and $100,000 was committed to Hurricane Helene research. WCU's partnership with NC Innovation continues with 6 applications submitted for funding consideration this fiscal year.
1.3.4: Encourage interdisciplinary initiatives in academic programs, research, and/or academic centers that connect business, sciences, engineering, technology, entrepreneurship, as well as the	WCU is proposing an interdisciplinary center to focus on additive materials construction techniques and infrastructure resiliency, if funding can be secured from supplemental relief funds from the Helene disaster. This program would blend disciplines from construction, engineering, and various STEM-related programs, and would provide great assistance to Western NC to foster sustainability and preparation for future natural disasters.

arts, education, recreation, and health professionals.	
1.3.5: Encourage external collaboration of faculty, staff, and students with industry, start-ups, research institutes, non-profits, and government agencies.	WCU continues to foster applied learning and research opportunities with industry partners and both government and local agencies. In the past year we have facilitated several connections for WCU students and faculty to projects ranging from senior living development to advanced technology and direct industry support. WCU is also the lead educational partner for a proposed advanced manufacturing and tech hub, known as the WNC Futures Factory, which will further accelerate such opportunities.

Goal 1.4 - Scholarship, Research, Creative / Cultural Activity

Promote excellence in scholarship, research, creative inquiry, and cultural activity

Strategic Initiatives	Summary of results to date
1.4.1: Value, promote, and provide opportunities for faculty-student scholarly collaborations with undergraduate and graduate populations.	WCU continues to strengthen faculty-student scholarly collaboration across colleges through mentorship, grant-funded research, and curriculum-integrated inquiry. Several departments now require scholarly work for graduation. In fiscal year 2025, faculty earned $1.79M in salary from 59 grants; students received $1.66M in educational awards and $300K in wages from 33 grants. The Graduate School allocated $2.58M for assistantships in 2024-2025, including $643K for research roles. The Brinson Honors College (BHC) supported 1,324 honors contracts in AY 2024-2025, with 864 (65.26%) tied to research outcomes. ORA and BHC co-hosted the second annual CATALYST Program, a 3.5-day immersive experience for rising honors freshmen. Eighteen students and 30 faculty/staff participated in research and leadership events. These efforts reflect WCU's ongoing commitment to advancing research, scholarship, and creative activity.
1.4.2: Improve internal and external promotion of scholarship, research, creative, and cultural activity.	WCU celebrates excellence in scholarship, research, and creative inquiry across students, staff, and faculty. The Graduate School supported the annual Three-Minute Thesis competition, while the Faculty Scholarship Celebration hosted the third Faculty Three-Minute Research event. ORA launched a comprehensive support site and monthly newsletter, spotlighting awardees and proposal data, and partnered with University Marketing to promote research stories. The Research Programs Coordinator continued expanding student-focused initiatives. Notably, the CATALYST program returned in summer 2025, a 3.5-day immersive experience for rising honors freshmen, co-sponsored by ORA and Brinson Honors College. ORA also maintains WCU's membership in Oak Ridge Associated Universities, providing faculty access to exclusive external funding aligned with national priorities in science, education, security, and health.
1.4.3: Promote interdisciplinary learning, research, engagement, and idea exchange.	WCU promotes and supports this initiative primarily informally with robust outcomes. The Honors College hosted the annual Conference on Undergraduate Research and Engagement (CURE) for over 360 students to promote undergraduate research, service learning, and interdisciplinary learning. Sponsored Research continues to provide support, guidance, and reporting for faculty and staff research and grants (including student research). The annual RASC (Research and Scholarship Conference) integrated interdisciplinary learning, research, and engagement campus wide. The Campus Theme, Mountain Life in Western North Carolina, also afforded funded and non-funded opportunities for collaborative and interdisciplinary learning. The multiple academic interdisciplinary programs are thriving and available to students and include Cherokee Studies, Global Black Studies, International Studies, Environmental Science, Integrated Health Sciences, and Latin American Studies, to list a few. Finally, Provost Starnes identified funding to support faculty work in Hurricane Helene relief and much of the resulting projects were interdisciplinary, research-based, and or grounded in community engagement.

1.4.4: Increase the number offered and the amount of support provided for research assistantships, tuition waivers, and student stipends through external funding and internal support.	The Graduate School allocated $2,586,000 in assistantship funds for academic year 2024-2025. This consisted of 204 allocations at an average stipend of $12,706. This represents a 12% increase in assistantship dollars from 2023-2024 and continues to guarantee a minimum wage of $15 per hour. In Summer 2025, the Graduate School awarded 38 Summer Graduate Research Assistantships with a stipend amount of $4,000 each. The Graduate School also awarded 12 in-state tuition remissions and 34 out-of-state remissions for a total allocation of $409,100. Graduate Student Excellence Scholarships in the amount of $100,000 were supplemented with $98,000 from other scholarship funds. Invest in Teachers scholarships were awarded to 25 new admits to the College of Education in the amount of $1,000 each for the academic year. Research Administration is incentivizing writing research assistantships into sponsored project proposals by changing the budget template to include an research assistantship line item and offering partial matches from graduate assistantship funds.
Goal 1.5 – Capacity to Serve Students and Eliminate Barriers Expand and support WCU's capacity to serve students and eliminate barriers to program and resource access.	
Strategic Initiatives	**Summary of results to date**
1.5.1: Expand and enhance networks of regional advisory committees to strengthen communication and collaboration among K-12, community college, and WCU in the areas of 1) curriculum goals and transferability; 2) the importance and value of higher education and the best strategies for marketing and recruiting; and 3) admissions and financial aid.	WCU Financial Aid partnered with Talent Search and several WNC high schools, Southwestern CC, and many WCU offices including Mentoring and Persisting to Success, Residential Living, Educational Outreach, Graduate School, and Biltmore Park campus to provide 28 FAFSA Day events and other information sessions. The WCU Advising Center provides a dedicated Senior Advisor of Transfer Services that works with transfer counselors at feeder institutions, connects prospective students with professional advisors, and collaborates with WCU Admissions. The Catamount Advising for Transfer Success (CATS) event supports our transfer population. This year, the Advising Center partnered with Admissions to virtually serve 45 guests from across North Carolina's feeder institutions about transfer and admissions processes and academic pathways. The Advising Center's senior transfer advisor published transfer guides to support NCCC students pursuing a transfer pathway; 111 guides were created reflecting pathways for WCU majors. Additionally, the senior transfer advisor visited feeder institutions to provide information about WCU's academic programs and coordinate advising events across institutions.
1.5.2: Track and increase institutional capacity for resident and distance summer session offerings for a wide variety of learners: undergraduate, K-12, and graduate students; adult and life-long learners.	Summer session has evolved significantly over the last several years. Changes in enrollment patterns, student needs, financial aid availability, and the role of summer in the university funding model have all altered summer session activities in significant ways. This year APR 19: Guidelines for Summer Session was reviewed, revised, and approved to account for these changes, increase enrollment, and foster innovation. A working group developed a list of policies and practice recommendation to enhance summer and its role in the curriculum. These included developing strategies for using summer session to improve retention and 4-year graduation rates, reviewing minimum course enrollments to verify their viability under the new funding model, developing policy to address 12-month faculty teaching load, examining and making recommendations on parts of team practices, summer pay and teaching load, and identifying incentives and strategies to increase enrollment and foster innovative offerings. To understand, the changing student needs two survey to students who took summer courses and to student who did not take summer courses has been developed.
1.5.3: Increase communication and marketing of summer opportunities in academic	Historically, Summer Session at WCU has focused on supporting degree completion as the primary motivation for student enrollment. In alignment with strategic goals, Summer Session has undertaken a focused initiative to expand communication and marketing efforts to reach a broader audience and highlight additional benefits of summer enrollment.

programs, short-term programming, research opportunities, internships, and other practical experiences for both students and others who reside in WNC.	Key messaging emphasized the cost-effectiveness of Summer Session courses under the NC Promise tuition plan and the flexibility of taking online courses while students pursue other summer opportunities. Marketing strategies were informed by data analysis to better target student populations and included: Enhanced outreach to campus partners to communicate the value of Summer Session. A more coordinated communication plan tailored for advisors, departments, faculty, and students. Increased visibility through updated signage and the launch of a refreshed marketing slogan. A student survey is currently underway to gather feedback and insights that will inform future marketing strategies and improve overall engagement.
1.5.4: Assure affordability of summer school offerings for both WCU degree-seeking students and those seeking credits for other institutions by adopting financial supports such as summer employment opportunities, NC Promise funding for summer sessions, and other financial aid opportunities.	WCU serves as an NC Promise school establishing a tuition plan that increases access to education by reducing student costs. This reduction alleviates the financial burden on students and allows students to get ahead or make up credits to stay on track to graduation. By implementing reduced pricing, summer session attracts new populations of learners as well. When students fall off-sequence or are behind their scheduled eight-semester plan, summer session offers the best opportunity to catch up on credits for four-year graduation. One of the challenges with summer session is its affordability. Students with financial needs may be unable to take summer courses. By allocating summer funds to the Summer Accelerator Grants, we off-set the costs of summer enrollment to encourage on-time-progress. Summer Student Employment Supplemental Funding internal grant is to give funding to departments that traditionally have not been able to hire student workers during the summer term (23 students hired). The Capitol Hill Program helps students find and complete internships on Capitol Hill by providing a stipend to assist with living costs (1 award).
Goal 1.6 – Enrollment and Retention Continue to coordinate WCU's student enrollment and retention strategies to ensure strengthened balance of access, diversity and student success, institutional mission, and sustainable revenue sources.	
Strategic Initiatives	**Summary of results to date**
1.6.1: Refine and adapt the strategic enrollment plan to meet student enrollment targets while maintaining academic rigor in our educational programs.	Test score reinstatement, Helene, delayed FAFSA launch, non-consumerism, and heightened competition are affecting enrollment. Strategies to combat challenges include: a new Western PTK Program and Catamount Commitment for transfers; events for school counselors; expansion of out-of-state recruitment; incorporation of AI Bot (PAWS) into recruitment; Cat Eyes Club engagement of alumni volunteers in recruitment; Choose NC pilot during 2024-25 and expansion in 2025-26; Direct Admission launch for 2025-26 (Connect NC and Common App); new EAB collaboration for transfer recruitment; territory management and regional engagement; incentivized recruitment events (e.g. open house and Honors Day); the Brinson Honors College Guarantee. Point-in-time registration is up for 1st-year students from WNC (+5.5%) and Honors College students (+15.5%), who perform and persist at higher rates. Registration is also up for Catamount Commitment recipients at the highest tier (4.0+ high school GPA). Advising restructuring, student success initiatives, and Catamount Commitment contribute to the strongest 1st-year retention rate since COVID.
1.6.3: Continue to develop innovative data-driven methods of monitoring and enhancing student success at the individual level.	Student Success continues to expand data-informed strategies to improve outcomes. Navigate provides advisors with real-time insight into student progress and risk. We have introduced ISSAQ, which evaluates 12 noncognitive factors across behavioral, motivational, emotional, and social domains to deepen understanding of student needs. In collaboration with the College of Engineering and Technology, we are piloting Early Momentum Metrics to identify behaviors that predict program-level

	retention, with plans to expand the initiative. CATalytics and OIPE enhanced dashboards (Student Success Factors and Student Achievement) and launched new ones, including Tutorial Services, Enrolled but Not Eligible, and Subsequent Enrollment, to track academic support usage and enrollment trends. We have laid the foundation for implementing the Postsecondary Data Partnership (PDP), which will introduce nine new dashboards next year, expanding our ability to monitor key student metrics across the institution. Recent policy changes, including revisions to academic standing and student financial procedures, are being leveraged to improve student retention and success outcomes.
1.6.4: Meet or exceed UNC System designated institutional goals in support of the WCU mission: (1) Prioritize low-income and rural enrollment and completion, as well as critical workforce credentials; (2) Improve five-year graduation rates and efficiency in undergraduate degrees and undergraduate achievement gaps; (3) Increase research productivity.	The UNC System updated designated institutional goals to align with the new performance funding model. Metrics include four-year graduation rate, undergraduate degree efficiency, average credits earned per year, first-time student debt at graduation, transfer student debt at graduation, education and related expenses per degree and health sciences and STEM credentials. WCU showed improvement in four of the seven metrics (four-year graduation rate, undergraduate degree efficiency, average credits earned per year, and STEM credentials) and met 2024 performance goals for two of the metrics (undergraduate degree efficiency and average credits earned per year). For two metrics (four-year graduation rate and first-time student debt at graduation) WCU met baseline targets but did not attain 2024 goals.

Strategic Direction 2:
Student Experience

Accomplishment Highlights

- **Promoting Civil Discourse:** The university offered 62 activities focused on cultural responsiveness through DegreePlus, with 1,332 students participating. The Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning also facilitated seven Civil Dialogue programs where 84 students and community members gained skills in discussing complex topics like affordable housing and free speech.
- **A Banner Year for Catamount Athletics:** WCU Athletics instilled significant pride across the community. For the second year in a row, the soccer team won the Southern Conference Championship. Seven teams, including football, cross country, and track and field, finished in the top three of the conference, creating widespread excitement among students, alumni, and fans.
- **Expanding High-Impact Practices:** WCU significantly increased student engagement in professional development opportunities. Over 1,690 students participated in 101 community-engaged courses, 214 students studied abroad, and students completed over 740 internships at the undergraduate and graduate levels.
- **Connecting Students with Alumni and Employers:** The Career Center hosted eight career fairs, connecting 2,028 students with 388 employers. The Office of Advancement and student groups hosted numerous events, including alumni panels and mentorship programs, to link current students with successful alumni in various industries.
- **Enhancing Student Wellness Initiatives:** As part of its second year in the JED Campus program, WCU launched Fresh Check Day, a new event for students to check in on their mental health and learn about available resources. The Wellness Promotion Team also created new programs like "Join Us for Dinner" and the "Silent Book Club" to connect with and support more introverted students.
- **Celebrating Appalachian Culture:** The university continued to celebrate the region's unique heritage through programs like the Rooted in the Mountains conference, the Cherokee Language Symposium, and the Mountain Heritage Center's exhibits. The Mountain Heritage Center also hosted summer camps and provided outreach to over 2,000 K-12 students.
- **Measuring Sense of Belonging:** The Graduate School implemented a new survey to gather data on sense of belonging from graduating students. Results showed that 84% of graduate student respondents agreed or strongly agreed that "WCU cares about me personally," providing a valuable baseline for future efforts.

STRATEGIC DIRECTION 2: Student Experience

We will enrich the student experience through creating intentional cocurricular and curricular programs, which will prepare students to successfully engage in a vibrant, complex, and culturally diverse world.

Goal 2.1 – Perspectives of Others

Create opportunities for students to explore points of view on different issues and to understand the perspectives of others through civil and informed discourse and debate.

Strategic Initiatives	Summary of results to date
2.1.1: Create opportunities for students to explore points of view on different issues and to understand the perspectives of others through civil and informed discourse and debate utilizing campus partners (i.e., Department of Campus Activities, Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning, DegreePlus, etc.).	There were 62 activities (78 total-16 canceled due to Hurricane Helene) approved in the category of Cultural Responsiveness through DegreePlus, with 1,332 students participating. These numbers include events hosted by Intercultural Affairs, Campus Activities, Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning, English, Residential Living, etc. Some examples include "A Reading with Tita Ramirez and Jose Olivarez" with 96 participants, and 202 participants at the Honors Global Symposium. The Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning facilitated seven Civil Dialogue programs, providing a structured opportunity for students and community members to gain skills in discussing topics such as affordable housing and free speech. In total, 84 attendees participated in CCESL's Civil Dialogue program. The Department of Campus Activities organized the "Catamounts Connect Conference" to introduce the concept of civil discourse and effective communication strategies.
2.1.2: Create and track opportunities for student membership and leadership on institutional decision-making committees and organizations.	Campus Recreation and Wellness hosted five academic interns: four from Parks and Recreation Management and one from Higher Education in Student Affairs and formed a Club Sports Council of eight student officers to co-develop program procedures. [6 opportunities] The Center for Career and Professional Development and DegreePlus engaged two students in redesigning departmental workshops. [1 Opportunity] Health and Wellness hosted a graduate assistant from HESA. Facilitated student engagement on the JED Campus Committee, the Health Safety Committee, and the Alcohol and Other Drugs Committee. [4 opportunities] The Department of Campus Activities hosted a graduate assistant from HESA. DCA facilitated two committees: one comprising 12 students for input on event planning and another of 10 students for concert selection. Student Government provided student representation on key institutional committees, including Tuition and Fees, Dining, Homecoming, QEP, JED Campus, One Book, Athlete Advisory, Alcohol and Other Drugs, and Health and Safety. [12 Opportunities]
2.1.4: Leverage intercollegiate athletics to instill pride among students, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends of the University.	Pride for Athletics at WCU stems from competitive success. This year Catamount Athletics saw success across several of our programs. We created excitement in our fanbase including students, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends. This past Athletic season: 1) Soccer won back-to-back Southern Conference Championships, and 2) Tennis won more matches in the history of the program for two years in a row. Overall, seven Catamount Athletic teams finished in the top three of the Southern Conference; Soccer finished 1st; Football, Men's Cross Country, and Men's and Women's Outdoor Track and Field, Men's Indoor Track and Field all earned 2nd place finishes; Men's Golf earned 3rd at the conference tournament. In addition, the Western Skybox construction

	project is underway at Whitmire Stadium which will transform football game day and keep the momentum going as we look to start phase 2 of our facilities upgrades.
Goal 2.2 – Institutional Pride Instill institutional pride through more visible recognition and celebration of university achievements and traditions.	
Strategic Initiatives	**Summary of results to date**
2.2.1: Create experiences that strengthen students' connection to their university and emphasize engagement with alumni and friends of the University as students prepare for a professional career.	The Career Center facilitated eight diverse career fairs, which included 388 employers and 2,028 students throughout the academic year. Employers also participated in 29 on-campus recruiting activities, providing students with opportunities to interact with employer and alumni partners. The Office of Advancement hosted New Student Send-Offs, welcoming new students and families with the help of alumni volunteers to build pride in WCU. During the year, the First-Gen Club hosted two separate alumni panels to connect students with alumni from the area who represented various industries and backgrounds. The Leaders in Action Mentorship program provided nearly 40 alumni mentors to students enrolled in the Leadership 244 class. The Leadership Capstone class brought in alumni to discuss high-level leadership with current students. Approximately 20 student ambassadors had the opportunity to engage with alumni and friends while volunteering their time. Students were asked to serve on panels for donor events and help engage with alumni, donors, and friends through social media campaigns during One Day for Western.
2.2.2: Build and sustain educational programs that recognize, respect, and celebrate Western North Carolina culture, including Cherokee history and traditions.	WCU offers educational programs that recognize, respect, and celebrate WNC culture, including Cherokee history and traditions, in the absence of a formal tracking mechanism. Several departments (World Languages, Anthropology and Sociology, History, and English Studies), and Hunter Library, offer courses and programming in southern Appalachian and/or Cherokee culture and history. Additionally, the Rooted in the Mountains annual conference, the Language Revitalization Project, the Sequoyah endowed professorship, Intercultural Affairs events, land acknowledgement adoption, Two Sparrows Place archeological collections facility (including a publication by the Chancellor's Office), and sponsored campus theme events, also support this initiative. The Mountain Heritage Center offers travelling as well as in-house exhibits on many aspects of WNC culture, and hosts, in collaboration with Special Events, Mountain Heritage Day, a celebration of southern Appalachian culture, heritage, and traditions for the past 50 years. The Center also hosts summer camps and other events for students and community, along with a permanent Discovering Appalachia exhibit in its gallery.
Goal 2.3 – Career Exploration and Skills Create opportunities for skill development and career exploration through involvement in experiential activities.	
Strategic Initiatives	**Summary of results to date**
2.3.1: Expand the utilization of the DegreePlus and other programs that promote transferrable skill development for students.	The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) identifies eight core competencies needed for career readiness. WCU offered events through the DegreePlus program in 2025 that meet many NACE career competencies. We offered the following events: 6 in Leadership; 451 attendees, 9 in Teamwork; 40 attendees, 73 in Cultural Responsiveness; 1,456 attendees, and 56 in Professionalism; 1,203 attendees. The Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning (CCESL) launched a new course designation, the Community Experience Course, as well as redefined and streamlined the Service-Learning Course criteria and designation process. CCESL approved 101 community-engaged course sections across all six colleges and representing 28 different departments/programs.

	Course participants numbered 1,692 individuals, taught by 58 unique course instructors. The courses included both residential and distance courses, as well as two service-learning travel abroad courses. WCU students logged 9,661+ service hours in Engage. Student awards were granted to four WCU students who received the Spark Award, one student who received the Spark Award with Distinction, and eight student leaders for their contributions to civic and community engagement.
2.3.2: Promote student engagement in high-impact practices connected to professional development such as undergraduate research, service-learning, internships, and study abroad.	To support undergraduate research, WCU provided funding for 46 proposals, benefiting 75 students, totaling $34,500. In addition, 29 students participated in NCUR, 25 students were registered to participate in SURF (cancelled due to the Hurricane), 139 students participated in RASC, and 18 students participated in the CATALYST program. This past year, the Office of Global Engagement sent 214 students on sponsored programming. These are inclusive programs that are either off-campus (international or domestic) or credit-bearing and academic. Western offers numerous opportunities for students to gain hands-on experience in their chosen fields through internships. This year, thirty majors offered direct internship courses, totaling 650 internships for undergraduates, with an additional eight graduate majors offering 96 internships. This year in total, there were 101 community-engaged course sections across five colleges from 28 different programs. A total of 1,692 students participated in these community-engaged courses, taught by 58 unique course instructors.
2.3.3: Develop co-curricular experiences that enhance classroom learning and professional development.	CCESL launched a new Community Experience Course and approved 101 community-engaged course sections across all six colleges. Course participants numbered 1,692 individuals, taught by 58 instructors. The courses included residential and distance courses, as well as two service-learning travel abroad courses. WCU students logged 9,661+ service hours. Four students received the Spark Award, one student received the Spark Award with Distinction, and eight student leaders were recognized for their contributions to civic and community engagement. The WALC addresses NACE career competencies in training activities for student employees and surveys employees to determine which skills have most improved during their employment and which will be most useful for their post-graduation plans. Employees rated communication and professionalism as their most improved skills and as the skills that will be most useful for their future plans. The CCPD presented in 107 classes & 105 workshops, met with 2,603 students, and supported 287 students with internships. DegreePlus tagged 119 events offering transferable skill development.
2.3.4: Identify and promote existing opportunities at WCU, the WNC region, and North Carolina, where DegreePlus students can engage in reflection and articulation (e.g., DegreePlus Level 3 Experiences).	The DegreePlus program has three levels. Level 3 is an opportunity for Reflection & Articulation in which students reflect on the application of their skills through interactive poster presentations. 38% of DegreePlus events focused on Cultural Responsiveness (CR). The Level 2 Skills Experience provides a meaningful "lab" in which students can explore inclusivity by applying the learning outcomes for the CR skill. Twenty-two students completed Level 3 of DegreePlus through poster presentations - a 241% increase. The experiential opportunities for learning transferable skills included a study abroad in Ireland, volunteering with The Salvation Army, a presentation at a regional conference for undergraduates, and volunteering at the Cullowhee Community Garden.

Goal 2.4 – Wellbeing and Full Potential

Create avenues to empower students to achieve their best possible wellbeing and cultivate a campus environment in which students can reach their full potential in all facets of their lives, both in and out of the classroom.

Strategic Initiatives	**Summary of results to date**

2.4.1: Create and implement programs that embrace the elements of wellness to build and sustain a collaborative, comprehensive framework approach, with innovative strategies for engagement to help students be healthy and well. Programs will offer awareness of the scope of services provided by WCU to our faculty, staff, and students through knowledge of resources, facilitating discussions regarding wellness, and making referrals to the appropriate offices.	We continue successful programs that provide information about wellness and link students to resources (e.g., Health & Wellness Fair; OkSOBERfest; Alcohol Awareness Week; Love Your Body Week). We completed our 2nd year of the JED Campus program, and we are implementing new programs to support mental health across campus including Fresh Check Day, which was launched in February, and is a program designed for students to check in on their mental health and to learn resources to assist. The Wellness Promotion created two new programs to connect with more introverted students to offer them support and resources: Join Us for Dinner and Silent Book Club. The Health & Wellness departments co-developed programs to support students including Trauma Informed Yoga. Additionally, WCU offered a skills group for students with ADHD. CCPS offered a wide range of workshops, 35 in all, that focused on occupational wellness while touching on the other wellness areas. CCPD cross-promotes wellness opportunities through digital signage and social media channels.
2.4.2: Utilizing the elements of wellness (environmental, social, intellectual, spiritual, occupational, physical, and emotional) as a comprehensive framework approach to increase cross-campus awareness of current programs, services, and resources that support and assist students in engaging in a holistic, total college experience.	The Health and Wellness Fair, held in September, is a key annual event that highlights the elements of wellness. Campus partners representing these different areas of wellness showcase their programs and services for student success. We continue providing training on assisting someone who is experiencing a mental health challenge and/or suicidal thoughts (sessions of Mental Health First Aid and four sessions of ATQ) to faculty/staff/students. These sessions emphasize resources available to students while helping our community to build skills to support each other. We also talk about the elements of wellness and related resources in the mandated Campus Safety Training for new employees. These trainings occur every other month. Wellness Promotion presentations (fifteen this year) on health and wellness introduce the elements of wellness to students and provide an overview of the programs and services available on campus.
Goal 2.5 – Sense of Belonging Create opportunities that increase a student's ability to find their sense of belonging	
Strategic Initiatives	**Summary of results to date**
2.5.1: Provide programs and initiatives, both formally and informally, for students living off-campus and on campus in residence halls designed to create a sense of belonging among incoming and continuing students. Programs and initiatives include but are not limited to student	Work across campus continued with a focus of increasing sense of belongingness through programs and events. Departments worked both individually and collaboratively to accomplish this initiative through active and passive programs. More than one hundred large-scale events/programs that were specifically meant to build students' connection to WCU took place. More than 800 programs were offered throughout campus centered around building connections among students and the institution. From individual meetings between staff and students to large scale events focusing on individual connections with students remained a focus. Attempts to contact and talk to newly enrolled students were made in their first year and beyond to discuss their experience, including their sense of belonging. Student employment led to an increased sense of belonging.

	clubs, student organizations, campus events, Greek Life, and major/disciplinary events.	Outreach aiming to provide support to and a sense of belonging for students, including support and therapy groups, were facilitated across campus. In addition to these co-curricular offerings, students participated in first year transition courses and academic learning communities with significant focus on creating a sense of belonging.
	2.5.2: Create a plan to gather data on sense of belonging from graduating students.	Graduate students' sense of belonging was gathered via survey distributed to all students when they applied for graduation. Graduate School collected responses for both December 2024 graduates (n=104) and May 2025 graduates (n=410). There was a 38% response rate to the survey. Surveys asked students the extent to which they agreed with the following statements: "I feel a part of my academic program at WCU" fifty percent of graduate students strongly agreed, and only 11% disagreed; "I am proud of my academic program" was strongly agreed with by 62% of respondents; "I feel comfortable being myself at WCU" had 55% strong agreement, and "WCU cares about me personally" was strongly agreed or agreed with by 84% of graduate students. Incoming undergraduate students taking a first-year experience course were assessed for sense of belonging using ISSAQ Student Survey. Sense of Belonging is a strength for incoming students. 87% of students agreed that faculty/staff will go out of their way to help them, and 75% of students agreed that people at WCU take pride in their accomplishments. Graduating undergraduate students were not surveyed this academic year.

Strategic Direction 4:
Regional Development and Engagement

Accomplishment Highlights

- **Expanding Health Care and Engineering Programs:** WCU is addressing critical workforce needs by adding a Doctor of Nurse Practice in Psychiatric Mental Health, a new B.S. in Mechanical Engineering, and a concentration in Industrial Engineering. The university is also expanding its Biltmore Park instructional site to include high-fidelity simulation labs for health care degrees.
- **Supporting the Community After Hurricane Helene:** In the aftermath of Hurricane Helene, CCESL supported numerous relief efforts, including supply drives and volunteer coordination. The Small Business & Technology Development Center assisted over 600 clients with disaster recovery, providing guidance on loans, cash flow, and strategic planning to build long-term resilience.
- **A Model for Community Service:** WCU employees dedicated significant time to community service, using 8,010 hours of community service leave—a substantial increase of over 4,000 hours from the previous year. Student engagement was also high, with nearly 1,700 students participating in 101 different community-engaged courses.
- **Driving Arts and Culture in WNC:** The university served as a major regional hub for arts and culture, hosting 223 public programs that engaged over 56,500 adults and youth. These events included performances, festivals, museum exhibitions, and matinees for 188 K-12 school groups.
- **Advancing Workforce Housing Solutions:** WCU is partnering with Mountain Projects and Givens Communities on the Webster Village project, a multi-income housing community that will yield between 210-235 new housing units for the region. The partnership began investing $1.5 million from Jackson County for infrastructure development.
- **Delivering Vital Clinical Services:** The university's student-led clinics provided thousands of hours of free care to the community. The Mountain Area Pro Bono Health clinic alone provided over 3,000 hours of care, saving community members over $40,000 in healthcare costs. Additionally, WCU students provided clinical placements at The Catamount School, serving 63 local middle schoolers.
- **Assisting "Part-Way Home" Students:** The Finish Line Program, which supports students returning to complete their first bachelor's degree, helped nine students graduate this past academic year. This brings the total number of graduates to 166 since the program began in 2015.

Strategic Direction 4: Regional Development and Engagement

Through regional and community partnerships, we will be a force for the progress and growth of Western North Carolina. A state-wide institution dedicated to the overall development of North Carolina, WCU serves all the state with particular focus on the communities, towns, and cities of the 17 western-most counties of North Carolina as well as the Qualla Boundary of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

Goal 4.1 – Workforce Growth and Development

Be the higher education leader in workforce growth and development in Western North Carolina.

Strategic Initiatives	Summary of results to date
4.1.1: Increase the number of degrees/credentials in regionally identified growth sectors, such as Health & Human Services, Engineering, IT, Hospitality & Tourism, Business, and other fields as annually identified in collaboration with regional partners. Grow these programs and develop new ones on main campus, the Asheville instructional site, and any other instructional sites, as appropriate.	Several degrees and other credentials were added this year including a Doctor of Nurse Practice in Psychiatric Mental Health, a highly sought-after health care field; certificates in Entrepreneurship and Innovation Leadership; a new degree in Mechanical Engineering; and a new concentration in Industrial Engineering. A new minor in Neurosciences and a certificate in Autism Care were also added. Work continues on a Master of Science in Engineering as well as a Masters Entry Program in Nursing. Additionally, the Experiential and Outdoor Education program, created a few years ago in response to a growing need within WNC's outdoor recreation industry, will host its largest cohort in Fall of 2025 and boasts a 100 percent graduation rate since the program started. More than 100 other curricular changes were also made to better address today's workplace needs.
4.1.2: Expand the regional service footprint of WCU beyond main campus though its instructional site in Asheville as well as other current and future sites in the region.	The instructional site in Asheville added 12,000 square feet of space at its location in Biltmore Park. This included classroom expansion as well as additional student and faculty support spaces. The addition will also allow the reconfiguration of several existing spaces to allow for the addition of several high-fidelity simulation labs for the health care degrees. These labs are expected to be online by the end of AY 2026. Additionally, the College of Engineering continues to grow its pipeline programs with the regional community colleges, and the Division of Education Outreach continues to work to restore its in-person continuing education and professional development offering to pre-pandemic levels. The Office of Regional and Economic Development continued to provide support for area economic development entities to bring new industry throughout Western North Carolina.
4.1.3: Expand the number and quality of undergraduate and graduate degrees/credentials offered as distance programs, whether entirely online or a combination of face-to-face and hybrid on main campus, the	WCU continued to grow its distance offering for both credit and non-credit programs. Credit distance programs added this year include new online certificates in Entrepreneurship, Innovation Leadership, and Autism Care. Additionally, the Master of Accounting program, went fully online and achieved great enrollment success, doubling headcount in the first year, and the MBA began work to transition to all online starting fall 2025. As the University's lead agent in non-credit professional development and continuing education, the Division of Educational Outreach continued to build new partnerships with companies and organizations and design curriculum that addressed industry-specific challenges, incorporated real-world case studies, and integrated hands-on experiences. Through strategic partnerships, stakeholder engagement, and a commitment to innovation,

Asheville instructional site, and any other instructional sites.	WCU is creating a dynamic ecosystem of learning that meets the needs of today's workforce and prepares learners for the challenges of tomorrow.
4.1.4: Develop a program of recruitment and support for part-way home (PWH) and Finish Line (FL) students, who need to return to higher education to complete a degree or other credential.	The Finish Line Program is designed to assist students in finishing their first bachelor's degree. It is catered toward both former students and new transfers who may qualify. This past academic year, nine students graduated through the Finish Line Program (eight students in December and one student in May). Ongoing efforts have pushed the total number of graduates to 166 since Finish Line began in Fall 2015. The program is promoted not only by professional advisors, WCU Admissions, and Educational Outreach, but also by the System Offices' contract Re-Up Education.
4.1.5: Increase the number of transfer students choosing WCU.	FAFSA delays and Helene aftermath confounded transfer enrollment for 2024-25. Efforts to minimize impact and rebound include: - Two new transfer scholarship programs (Catamount Commitment and Western PTK Scholars) for fall and spring terms. - Transfer questions added to the Orientation survey. - Participation in the UNC System Transfer Conference. - Liberal Studies (LS) waivers to AAS completers who meet at least six LS categories. - Whee Retreat and Connect events for transfer counselors. - Expanded regional admissions counselor engagement. - Transfer Tuesday information sessions. - Web refresh with greater emphasis on recruitment. - Expansion of out-of-state recruitment. - A new tutorial video for prospective transfer students. - Incorporation of AI Bot (PAWS) into recruitment. - Tweaks to recruitment from advising survey. - Overhaul of transfer MOUs (launch fall 2025). - Updated transfer guides. - Recruitment of transfer professionals to the Cat Eyes Club. - Potential expansion of distance offerings. - New EAB collaboration and added prospect name acquisition for transfer recruitment. - Request recurring marketing funds for distance programs.
4.1.6: Develop a next-level continuing education and professional development program that utilizes traditional and alternative credentials, as well as stackable credentialing that integrates tightly with undergraduate and graduate degree programs.	Educational Outreach (EO) is advancing next-level continuing education and professional development by designing credential-based programs that meet the evolving needs of today's workforce. In collaboration with university colleges, associations, and industry partners, EO creates flexible, industry-relevant learning pathways that support lifelong learning, career advancement, and personal enrichment. By identifying skill gaps and workforce demands, EO develops tailored, practical programs that empower learners and support regional talent development. EO's non-credit ecosystem, spanning professional development, customized training, and enrichment, is driven by collaboration with stakeholders and subject matter experts. Through outreach, EO promotes upskilling and reskilling, builds strategic partnerships, and customizes curricula to address real-world challenges. Programs are offered in diverse formats, online, hybrid, and in-person, to meet learners where they are. Continuous assessment and feedback ensure EO's offerings remain agile, impactful, and aligned with employer needs.

4.1.7: Develop a system of research and reporting to support awareness of regional workforce and other development needs when creating educational offerings and other campus engagement activities.	Bi-annual reports are provided to Economic Development organizations throughout Western NC. These reports contain program participation and projected degree completion information for specific fields of study that are relevant to identified industry sectors for each county.

Goal 4.2 – Issues Facing Western North Carolina

Serve as lead convenor on major issues facing Western North Carolina at both the regional and local levels.

Strategic Initiatives	Summary of results to date
4.2.1: Convene events with partners, business leaders, and other community groups to discuss and address significant local and regional issues.	WCU has both hosted and participated in numerous conferences to address key economic issues, such as housing, childcare, infrastructure, and workforce development. My office has presented at the NC Rural Center's annual summit, the Institute of Emerging Issues, and the Harvard Executive Crisis Leadership cohort.
4.2.2: Publish and distribute widely, an annual report of WCUs regional and community development and engagement.	The Office of Economic Development and Strategic Partnerships provides an annual review that is included in the Chancellor's Division Report, which is published in July of each year. In addition, regular updates are provided to Executive Council and the Board of Trustees, along with bi-annual reports that are provided to Economic Development organizations throughout WNC.

Goal 4.3 - Business Retention and Expansion

Become a key regional partner in business retention and expansion

Strategic Initiatives	Summary of results to date
4.3.1: Enrich business development centers, one in Jackson County to serve southwest NC and one in Buncombe County to serve metro Asheville, that physically bring together WCU's and other entities' business development units.	WCU has partnered with Jackson County Economic Development, the Sylva Main Street and Economic Development Association, HATCH, and NC Growth to develop a feasibility study for a small business development center in Jackson County. A search for funding assistance is currently under way to build a facility on an identified site just outside of Sylva. Also, WCU is the lead educational partner for the WNC Future's Factor concept, to be located in the Asheville vicinity, to support advanced manufacturing, technology, and Industry 5.0 research and development.
4.3.2: Lead regional efforts to foster small-business and entrepreneurial endeavors via entrepreneurship curricula, Corporation for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, Small Business &	The Office of Economic Development and Strategic Partnerships continues as the conduit and primary connection point for WCU's role in supporting small business and entrepreneurship development across Western NC. Primarily we have focused efforts in support of the Mountain West Partnership, the regional economic development collaborative for Southwestern NC, and the Carolina West Partnership, which serves the Greater Asheville-Hendersonville area. Both organizations have targeted programs in support of small business development. The SBTDC center in Asheville remain dedicated to supporting local businesses through Helene disaster recovery. Since October 1st, they have assisted over 600 clients, with numbers continuing to grow due to

Technology Development Center, the RAPID Center, and the region's Community College Small Business Centers, Community Development Financial Institutions, and non-profit resources.	increased rural outreach and targeted efforts in the most affected areas. While most support has been provided in Asheville, given Buncombe County's high number of registered businesses, staff are actively expanding into surrounding communities by participating in recovery-focused events. Disaster assistance includes loan navigation (SBA, CDFI, Mountain BizWorks, and local banks), financial guidance addressing cash flow challenges, and strategic recovery planning. These services aim to help business owners build both short- and long-term paths to resilience.

Goal 4.4 Regional and Community Engagement

Be a state model for regional and community engagement.

Strategic Initiatives	Summary of results to date
4.4.1: Convene, lead, and invest in the development of Cullowhee as a community.	M. Byers and R. Price serve as board members on Cullowhee Revitalization Inc (CuRev), M. Byers serves as WCU's designated member on the Cullowhee Planning Council and the Tuckaseigee Water and Sewer Authority. WCU continued progress towards EDA funding to repair the Cullowhee dam and provide for the potential to facilitate a future river park below the dam. Due to the impact of Hurricane Helene WCU postponed the 50th Mountain Heritage Day (MHD), a significant investment in Cullowhee and the region, but provided a truncated version in March of 2025. Beginning in Fall 2025 MHD will have a refreshed format. WCU health clinics are investments in our community (pro bono PT and social work clinic, the hearing and speech clinic, the McKee Clinic, etc.). Additionally, WCU continues its strong partnership with Vecinos to provide healthcare for migrant farmworkers. WCU continues to maintain hiking/biking trail on campus for community and campus use. The WCU Seeds and Soil conference, aimed at local/regional non-profits, was revitalized in 2025 with a more interactive and well-attended format.
4.4.2: Develop interdisciplinary clinics(s), fixed or mobile, to serve the region and provide clinical placements for our students.	Work to add clinics for counseling and social work and space for the physical therapy and aphasia clinics at Biltmore Park was completed. Programs are moving forward with a pilot next year. Mountain Area Pro Bono Health, a clinic self-supported through student fundraising, is now in its 10th year offering free health services to the Cullowhee and Asheville areas. This year, in addition to counseling services provided by the PsyD and PMHNP-DNP programs, speech therapy was provided by the CSD program. More than 3,000 hours of care were provided by WCU students at 355 appointments, saving >$40,000 in healthcare costs. The McKee Clinic is a nonprofit clinic in Cullowhee. Students (22) from WCU graduate psychology programs served 67 individuals in the community. The Catamount School (TCS) served 63 Jackson County 6th-8th graders. There were >130 clinical placements at TCS which included WCU students from education, nursing, psychology and counseling programs. Finally, Project Discovery, which has had continuous federal TRiO grant funding since the 1980s, provided experiences to over 900 middle and high school students from the region to encourage a postsecondary education.
4.4.3: Develop a university-specific Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS).	WCU completed our Economic Impact Study in December of 2024. One appended and approved by the BOT in June of 2025, the document now becomes the basis for comparison to Comprehensive Development Strategies as developed by local government and partner organizations from throughout Western NC. In FY 2026, a compilation of those CEDS will be utilized to form a guiding document for the Office of Economic Development and Strategic Partnerships.

4.4.4: Leverage the fine and performing arts to advance WCU's commitment to regional and community engagement on the main campus, instructional sites, and across the Western North Carolina region.	From performances and festivals to exhibitions and public art, WCU serves as a regional resource for high quality, affordable arts experiences by offering a range of experiences, primary offered through the Belcher College of Fine and Performing Arts as well as the Mountain Heritage Center and the Annual Literary Festival. In 2024-2025, WCU hosted a total of 223 public arts and culture programs which engaged a total of 56,504 adults and youth (K-12), including 188 K-12 school groups in attendance for exhibition tours or matinees. All activities were open to the public and included in-person events at Bardo Arts Center in the Performance Hall and WCU Fine Art Museum exhibitions and receptions, performances at Coulter Recital Hall, Niggli Studio Theatre, University Auditorium, Mountain Heritage Center, and other areas on campus. Media exposure included editorials, articles, and paid advertising across WNC outlets such as the Sylva Herald, Smoky Mountain News, Cherokee One Feather, Mountain Xpress, Blue Ridge Public Radio, WLOS, The Laurel of Asheville, The Laurel of Highlands-Cashiers, Macon County News, Franklin Press, Biltmore Beacon, and WNC Magazine.
4.4.5: Encourage and support individual regional and community engagement by students, faculty, and staff.	For fiscal year 2025, 480 (+170 from fiscal year 2024) employees utilized 8,010 hours of community service leave (CSL) (+4,053 from fiscal year 2024). Staff Senate reached 100% participation logging 1,761 hours of CSL. Examples of use include post hurricane service projects, volunteering at local schools, and Operation Christmas Child. In the wake of Hurricane Helene, the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning (CCESL) established a resource page to connect volunteers with community needs, as well as to share resources for those impacted by the hurricane. CCESL planned or supported 36 community outreach activities including 2 supply drives and 3 blood drives, as well as 80 community service opportunities with the local Hurricane Helene distribution center. CCESL also facilitated the Greek Weekend of Service in March 2025 and the Pride of the Mountains Marching Band Day of Service in November 2025, involving close to 300 students in assisting 10 organizations. CCESL approved 101 community-engaged course sections across six colleges representing 28 departments. Student participants in these courses numbered 1,692, taught by 58 instructors. Additionally, CCESL promoted 281 events for 25+ community partners.
4.4.6: Identify and annually place students, faculty, and staff on key regional and community leadership boards.	The offices of the Chancellor and the Provost continually scan the landscape for strategic opportunities for faculty, staff, and students to serve on or be involved with state, regional, or community industry, non-profit, governmental, or leadership boards. Below is a curated list of strategic boards on which WCU has representation. Asheville Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors NC Campus Compact Harris Regional Hospital Board of Directors Jackson County Business and Industry Board EDPNC Economic Advisory Council Cullowhee Revitalization Endeavor (CuRvE) Board Southwestern Workforce Development Board of Directors Executive Committee Mountain West Partnership Board of Directors Dogwood Health Trust Board of Directors Mountain Area Health Education Consortium (MAHEC) Board of Directors Blue Ridge Public Radio Board of Directors Tuckaseigee Water and Sewer Authority Board of Directors Cullowhee Planning Council Jackson County Comprehensive Plan Advisory Council NCDOT Statewide Multimodal Freight Plan Council Center for Domestic Peace Board of Directors

	Vecinos Board of Directors Haywood County Chamber of Commerce Circles of Jackson County NC Arboretum Board of Trustees

Goal 4.5 – Leverage Expertise Leverage WCUs expertise in key areas to help other institutions, large employers, and government entities.	
Strategic Initiatives	**Summary of results to date**
4.5.2: Serve as a resource to regional partners to develop leadership in environmentalism and sustainability.	The campus Strategic Sustainability Plan is currently in progress and expected to be completed August 2025.
4.5.3: Leverage WCU's expertise in public/private partnerships for housing development to grow workforce housing in the region.	Webster Village, a partnership between Mountain Projects, WCU, and Givens Communities, made progress in seeking funding for infrastructure on the development of a multi-income housing community in Webster. The Partnership began investing $1.5 million in funding for infrastructure from Jackson County. The intent is for the Partnership to develop a master-planned, multi-income housing community that will yield between 210-235 new housing units, targeting multiple income sectors in a challenging housing environment. Those sectors include accommodations for low-income senior living (Givens), adult working professionals (WCU), and low-to-moderate income single-family homes targeting first-time home buyers (Mountain Projects). WCU renewed its master lease of four apartment units for sub-lease to new faculty and staff on a short-term basis, until they can find a more permanent living arrangement.

Strategic Direction 5:
Employee Excellence

Accomplishment Highlights

- **Prioritizing Employee Compensation:** Making salary a top institutional priority, WCU allocated $1.3 million in campus-based funds to address labor market, equity, and retention concerns, supplementing a 3% legislative increase. Analysis shows 98% of faculty salaries are now at or above the 35th percentile of peer institutions.
- **Record Growth in Research Funding:** Faculty achieved a 49% increase in sponsored project funding, securing nearly $10.3 million in awards. This funding provided $1.8 million in direct salary support for faculty and created numerous research and wage opportunities for graduate and undergraduate students.
- **Supporting Professional Development:** The university provided nearly $20,000 through the Staff Senate Professional Development fund, enabling 41 staff members to pursue external development opportunities. In total, the university allocated over $848,000 for external professional development and training for employees in fiscal year 2025.
- **Enhancing Faculty Workload Flexibility:** In response to a new UNC System policy, WCU revised its internal faculty workload policy (APR 12). The updated policy directs department heads to work with faculty to develop annual workload plans that can be tailored to better support the teacher-scholar model, including differentiated loads for grant-funded research or curriculum development.
- **Promoting Employee Mental Health:** The university continued its partnership with Headspace Care, providing on-demand mental health services to faculty and staff. Employee utilization was 14.7%, significantly higher than the 10.4% average for other participating UNC System institutions. The university also provides access to the "Calm" app and the Compsych Employee Assistance Program.
- **Recognizing Non-Tenure Track Faculty:** The university continued to advance its promotion pathway for fixed-term faculty, with five individuals promoted this year, bringing the total number of promotions to 103 since the program's inception. For the first time, fixed-term faculty were also eligible for the Chancellor's Travel Fund, with 14 individuals receiving grants totaling over $10,800.

Strategic Direction 5: Employee Excellence

We will continue to attract, retain, and promote outstanding faculty and staff while providing valuable scholarship, leadership, and professional development opportunities

Goal 5.1 – Salaries and Compensation

Ensure salary and compensation benefits package remains an institutional priority to attract, reward, and retain the highest quality employees.

Strategic Initiatives	Summary of results to date
5.1.1: Advocate with governing bodies for financial resources and structural framework necessary to offer competitive, attractive, and cost-effective total compensation (salary and benefits) packages.	A top institutional legislative priority that was approved at the December 2024 WCU Board of Trustees meeting was salaries for current faculty and staff. Additionally, university leadership continues to advocate for faculty and staff compensation to key external constituents to the greatest extent possible. The statewide fiscal year 2025 budget provided for a 3% across the board increase for faculty and staff salaries. In addition, last year the University allocated $1.3M to address labor market, equity, career progression, and retention concerns. In February 2025 the UNC System Office released new EHRA Non-Faculty salary ranges based upon current market data.
5.1.2: Develop, implement, or strengthen institutional efforts to address salary shortfalls, making this a top institutional priority, in addition to, or in the absence of, salary maintenance as a state funding priority.	A top institutional legislative priority that was approved at the December 2024 WCU BOT meeting was salaries for current faculty and staff. During fiscal year 2025 WCU effectively utilized state appropriated and university-based funds to address priority faculty and staff salary issues to include the following: - 3% Legislative Increase (July 2024) - $1.3M in campus-based funding allocated in fiscal year 2025 to address labor market, equity, career progression, and retention concerns. - Utilized the UNC System Faculty Recruitment & Retention Fund to provide $26,613 in salary increases in fiscal year 2025 to retain high performing faculty. - Trend analysis to assess progress towards target salary goals is conducted annually. Information from this analysis is provided to University Leadership to include the Board of Trustees, Executive Council, University Salary Committees, and Faculty and Staff Senates. Highlights from the most recent analysis showed the following findings: 56.6% of EHRA NF salaries are at or above the 25th percentile of new 2025 UNC System salary ranges; The current SHRA market index is 92% (as compared to 89% in 2024); 98% of Faculty salaries are at or above the 35th percentile (vs. 64.3% in 2021).

Goal 5.2 – Professional Development and Long-term Promotion Opportunities

Ensure all employees have access to valuable professional development and training opportunities, to support increased capacity and productivity as well as long-term career promotion opportunities.

Strategic Initiatives	Summary of results to date
5.2.1: Support professional development for all employees as a managerial priority, by devoting	The University continues to provide funding ($20,000 in fiscal year 2025) to the Staff Senate Professional Development fund which is designed to provide funding for external professional development opportunities for staff. For fiscal year 2025, this fund has spent $18,599 with 41 staff receiving funding in 5 divisions: Academic Affairs, Athletics, Advancement, Student Affairs, and the Chancellor's Office. Staff Senate has a remaining balance as of May 22, 2025, of $1,441 and will continue to solicit applications for

the appropriate time and funding to the effort.	the remainder of fiscal year 2025. Additionally, in fiscal year 2025, the university allocated $848,111 for external professional development/ training programming (excludes travel). The University also continued to place an emphasis on ensuring adequate resources and availability for internally sponsored programming. In fiscal year 2025, for example, 1,808 individuals participated in formal WCU HR-sponsored professional development offerings.
5.2.2: Develop a process to report and document the level and engagement of faculty and staff in professional development, both internally and externally.	HR has continued to work with the Catalog application with Canvas that includes a registration tool for on-line and in-person training events. Reporting capabilities that allow for mixing variables (supervisor, department, job category, etc.); and interface with Banner for the updating of employee profiles in Canvas/Catalog has reached maximum functionality. A task force of key stakeholders created a business case for an Enterprise Solution for a Staff and Faculty Learning System that will provide a mechanism for quality assurance in the workforce, continuity in departmental operations, and advancing the potential for career growth and long-term promotional opportunity. The business case was accepted, and a presentation of the proposed system was presented to select Executive Staff and the Chief Purchasing Officer on December 3, 2024. Approval was received to move forward with a project request to initiate an Invitation to Bid. The project request was submitted with supporting documentation on December 10, 2024, and is now in the project queue for resourcing/scheduling. A draft of the Invitation to Bid including specifications was submitted to the Project Management team on 5/1/2025.
5.2.3: Develop a campus-wide mechanism that provides training and documentation for the most frequently utilized WCU systems and processes	My Resources, launched in September 2022, has continued to evolve as the university's knowledge base. Marketing and Communications as part of the public website redesign has been encouraging the movement of internal content currently on the public website to My Resources. This has also increased the number of users across campus who were originally unfamiliar with the platform and has allowed for more feedback on how to improve content. The number of views has increased by 216.15% in fiscal year 2025 over fiscal year 2024 for an average number of views per month of 271. As of January 2025, the views have increased to a record 489 views per month. There are currently 130 contributors/publishers on the platform. The knowledge base can be accessed via https://myresources.wcu.edu
5.2.4: Develop mapping of position-based skills, competencies, and access needed for staff positions, as a mechanism for quality assurance in the workforce, continuity in departmental operations, and advancing the potential for career growth and long-term promotional opportunity.	Initial project assessment performed in fiscal year 2022. The overall scope of this project will require additional resources beyond what is currently available. A review of current staffing hiring patterns has shown that current promotional opportunities for staff are not only available but critical to overall institutional operations (in fiscal year 2025, 24% of all staff hires were via internal promotion). For SHRA staff positions, the current UNC System Career Banding Classification system includes a competency profile for each position which is utilized to ensure equity across similarly situated jobs/roles. This initiative will be further assessed next fiscal year for possible revision.
Goal 5.3 – Professional Development for Research Support scholarship and creative activities to foster our mission as a regional comprehensive university.	
Strategic Initiatives	**Summary of results to date**
5.3.1: Strengthen the organizational structure to better	Faculty submitted 102 proposals for sponsored research for a total of $20.8M (a 6% increase over last year in proposals submitted). External sponsors granted 70 awards for a total of $10.3M (a 49% increase in amount from the prior year and a 13% increase from two years ago, 55% from federal sources). Faculty earned $1.8M in salary support, while students received $2M in

integrate research and the Graduate School at our University.	educational awards and wages. The provost awarded 44 campus investigators $160K in Scholarly Development Awards to stimulate external funding. After Hurricane Helene, WCU committed $97K to 10 faculty projects related to impact, recovery, and community resilience. NC Collaboratory Grants to 9 faculty in the amount of $104K provided additional support for regionally focused solutions to storm recovery. Academic Project Grants provided $18K for 46 projects involving 75 undergraduate students. WCU sent 29 undergraduate research students to the National Conference on Undergraduate Research with $26K of support. CATALYST Summer Research and Leadership Program welcomed its 2nd cohort of incoming honors students. The 3rd Research and Scholarship Conference was held to celebrate faculty, undergraduate, and graduate research.
5.3.2: Build individual faculty, staff, and graduate student capacity through support of development activities aimed at increasing research and grant proposal writing, publications, creative work, and other scholarly endeavors.	In fiscal year 2025, WCU faculty earned $1.79M in salary support across 59 grants. Students received $1.66M in educational awards and $300K in wages from 33 grants, reflecting strong support for collaborative research. The Graduate School allocated $2.58M for assistantships in 2024-2025, with $643K directed to research roles. The Office of Research Administration (ORA) launched the Faculty Research Mentoring (FaRM) award and two rounds of Provost Scholarship Development Grants, investing $110K in faculty-led projects. Implementation of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activities (RSCA) strategic planning recommendations continues, led by the interim Associate Dean for Research and the Director of Research Administration. WCU also submitted six funding applications through its growing partnership with NC Innovation and remains an active member of Oak Ridge Associated Universities. ORA supported professional memberships to strengthen research development capacity.
Goal 5.4 – Faculty as Teacher / Scholar Create an environment in which the primary role of faculty as teacher scholar is recognized and valued.	
Strategic Initiatives	**Summary of results to date**
5.4.1: Assess and support the needs of non-tenure track faculty.	This academic year was the fourth year a promotion pathway was available for fixed-term faculty. Four fixed-term faculty were promoted from Instructor to Associate Instructor rank and one fixed-term faculty was promoted from Assistant to Associate Professor of Practice (five total promotions). This cycle brings the total number of fixed-term faculty who have been promoted to 103. Additionally, we have continued to support the professional development of our fixed-term faculty through professional development grants. New this past year, fixed-term faculty were also permitted to apply the Chancellor's Travel Fund to support their own scholarship and creative activity. Fourteen fixed-term faculty applied for and received grants. Over $10,800 was awarded to these individuals to pursue professional development activities or present scholarly work.
5.4.2: Encourage department heads and deans to utilize flexibility within the parameters of fiscal realities in developing and implementing integrated faculty workload expectations, which allow for teaching, scholarship, and service expectations tailored to local need, skill, and specialization.	A new system-directed faculty workload policy prompted the revision of WCU's internal workload policy (APR 12). As part of the policy, department heads/school directors are directed to work with faculty to develop explicit workload plans annually. The standardized workload is intended to include important practices in which faculty engage their students like lab activities, clinical and teacher supervision, research and internship supervision, and studio experiences. Department heads/school directors will also capture unique situations in which a differentiated or tailored workload might be more appropriate to best support the teacher-scholar model. Examples might include a shift in load to allow for intense, grant-funded research projects or curriculum development.
Goal 5.5 – Healthy Lifestyle	

	Create a campus environment that facilitates a healthy lifestyle for employees.	
	Strategic Initiatives	**Summary of results to date**
	5.5.1: Promote employee mental health through programming and services, addressing issues such as destigmatizing mental health, and improving work-life balance, stress management, and employee resilience.	Initially launched in Fall 2022, WCU continued to offer the Headspace Care On-demand mental health program for faculty and staff. For the first half of 2025, employee utilization of this program was 14.7% (244 employees) as compared to 10.4% for other participating UNC System institutions. Additionally, the university continued to offer the "Calm" app with 550 faculty and staff signing up for services in fiscal year 2025. Additionally, WCU celebrated its 26th annual Employee Appreciation Day in September. A luncheon, complete with vendor fair was held with approximately 1100 faculty and staff in attendance. WCU's partnership with Compsych to provide Employee Assistance Program services continues to be successful. The annualized rate of utilization for fiscal year 2025 was 15% with a total of 223 services.
	5.5.2: Encourage physical health of employees by promoting physical fitness, healthy eating, activity, and movement.	During the past academic year, the University created a comprehensive guide to Wellness opportunities and services available to employees. The guide is distributed during onboarding and will be shared at the 2025 Employee Appreciation Day event. Campus Recreation and Wellness continues to offer employees access to two free Campus Recreation Group X classes per week in the Fall and Spring semesters, and one class in the Summer. WHEEforlife.wcu.edu promotes both campus and community wellness opportunities. WCU faculty and staff have access to the Campus Recreation Center (Fee required), indoor pool (free with Cat Card), and free access to many campus outdoor spaces to include: over six miles of walking/hiking/biking trails, track, picnic area, tennis courts.
	Goal 5.6 – Environmental Challenges (Recruit and Retain) Contribute to employee recruitment and retention by addressing environmental challenges for employees and their families	
	Strategic Initiatives	**Summary of results to date**
	5.6.1: Implement a flex-work policy, aligned with the policy provided by the System Office, as a tool which can be strategically employed to improve productivity, employee satisfaction, and maintain our position as a competitive employer.	In partnership with the UNC System Office, WCU fully implemented formal Flexible Work Arrangement guidelines in Summer 2021 and continues to provide flexible work opportunities where feasible. These guidelines are designed to facilitate flexible work arrangements where practicable while ensuring all operational needs of the University are met. These guidelines are reviewed on a regular basis and an annual report on usage is provided to Executive Council. For fiscal year 2025, 188 employees had approved flexible work arrangements in place (163 hybrid, 25 fully remote). WCU HR continues to provide ongoing training/information sessions on WCU's Flexible Work Arrangement guidelines.
	5.6.2: Provide support for dual career households through programs such as regional employment networks, and access to a variety of resources such as institutional job posting boards and career fairs.	The University remains an active member of HERC (Higher Education Resource Consortium) of the Carolinas. Through this partnership, the WCU community has access to a "dual career" search engine designed to identify career opportunities within a defined geographical location. The addition of JobElephant as WCU's advertising agency provides predictive analytics and an advertising recommendation engine to enhance our recruitment reach. To further address housing the university continues to share the Jackson County Chamber of Commerce listing of home/apartment rentals in the area for non-student adults/families to connect employees to available housing. Additionally, two community Facebook groups are administered through Human Resources to allow group members to post both "housing wanted" and "housing available" listings on their group boards. For fiscal year 2025, WCU has participated in multiple regional career fair events and has posted positions on over 100 job boards.

Strategic Direction 6:
Responsible Stewardship

Accomplishment Highlights

- **Strategic Reallocation of $5.2 Million:** Through a campus-wide exercise, WCU demonstrated significant fiscal stewardship by identifying $5.2 million in reallocated funds. These resources were freed up through efficiency gains and better contract pricing and will be used to cover inflationary costs and other strategic priorities without increasing tuition and fees.
- **Advancing Major Campus Projects:** Guided by the 2022 Campus Master Plan, WCU made significant progress on capital improvements. Construction began on the new West Side stands at the football stadium, renovation of the Moore building is set to begin in November 2025, and legislative funding was secured for a new Engineering building.
- **Improving Business Process Efficiency:** The Controller's office has eliminated a significant amount of paper files by implementing an electronic document storage system, reducing paper and copier costs. Additionally, the integration of the travel card into the Chrome River system has automated expense reporting and simplified reconciliation for employees.
- **New Printers Cut Costs and Devices:** After a review of the campus printer fleet, the university reduced the number of devices by 67. The tiered pricing model was also revised based on current print volumes to better offset expenses, demonstrating a commitment to operational efficiency.
- **Strengthening Emergency Preparedness:** Following the impact of Tropical Storm Helene, the Department of Emergency Services led a university-wide after-action review to identify lessons learned and enhance future response. The department also facilitated a comprehensive tabletop exercise with the UNC System for the university's crisis management teams to improve overall readiness.
- **Enhancing Cybersecurity Measures:** The Division of IT implemented more secure and phish-resistant identity management approaches for privileged accounts. A dated security monitoring system was retired in favor of a modern application, resulting in significant improvements in incident detection and logging capabilities.

Strategic Direction 6: Responsible Stewardship

We will focus our priorities on facilities, technology, core resources, and business policies and practices

Goal 6.1 – Funding Models

Implement sustainable funding models to ensure fiscal stability.

Strategic Initiatives	Summary of results to date
6.1.1: Continue budget development methods that incorporate well-vetted recurring costs in the budget so that revenue streams are permanently assigned to those costs and reliance on nonrecurring funding is reduced for operational efficiency.	The UNC System Office put all campuses through an exercise during the 2025 fiscal year which required strategic resource allocation. In simple terms, it means that departments, units, and colleges within the university must identify under-utilized resources (i.e. budget lines) or efficiency gains through the elimination or consolidation of positions and programs to free up funding for expenditures which require additional resources. Additional resources are frequently required because of inflation. In the case of non-state funded units such as auxiliary and athletic operations, legislative salary increases will require additional resources that are not supplied by legislative budget action. The purpose of the exercise was for the university to demonstrate that it has taken other reasonable measures to cover cost increases before seeking an increase in student tuition and fees in the 2026-27 tuition and fee cycle. As a result of this exercise, the university identified $5.2 million of reallocation through better contract pricing, filling vacant positions with employees paid at a lower salary because of less experience, and reallocating positions to meet student demand.
6.1.2: Develop and fine-tune the comprehensive all-funds budget while working with stakeholders across campus to ensure a collaborative process that promotes a shared understanding of resource allocation and management in pursuit of strategic priorities.	The UNC System continues to utilize the all-funds budget as an exercise in resource allocation and strategic planning. During the 2025 fiscal year, the Budget Office developed the all-funds budget for the 2026 fiscal year based on the previous year's revenues and expenses adjusted for inflation, legislative salary increases, and other known revenue and expense increases or decreases. Once the initial all-funds budget was prepared, stakeholders across campus were engaged in their unit's budget to ensure that the projections prepared were reasonable in nature and aligned with the unit and the institution's strategic priorities. As in prior years, the final version was reviewed and approved by Executive Council and the Board of Trustees before being sent to the Board of Governors.

Goal 6.2 – Master Plan

Maintain the Campus Master Plan.

Strategic Initiatives	Summary of results to date
6.2.1: Ensure sustainability and fiscal resources necessary to update and maintain the Campus Master Plan.	Update of 2014 Campus Master Plan was approved and adopted by the Board of Trustees during its meeting of March 2022. Following Strategic Initiative 6.2.2, this current update now guides and informs decisions until a new or updated Campus Master Plan is adopted. Fiscal resources will need to be identified to perform a new or updated plan within the next five years.
6.2.2: Use the Campus Master Plan to guide and inform decisions	The new 2022 Campus Master Plan Update continues to provide guidance in the physical development of the campus. Completed projects include the Apodaca Science Building, North Baseball Parking Deck, Energy Production Facility (Steam Plant), and the new

	Lower Campus Residence Halls (the Rocks). The renovation of Moore has proceeded with the completion of Joyner Drive Upgrade and hazardous material abatement and selective demolition. Renovation of Moore to begin November 2025 with a scheduled completion of August 2027. Athletic Facilities Improvements have begun with the construction of the new West Side stands with a scheduled completion of August 2026. Legislative funding was also secured for construction of a new Engineering building. Advance planning effort for this new building is complete with the full design progressing. Additional projects identified within the 2022 Campus Master Plan Update are included in the university's 6-year capital plan.
Goal 6.3 – Business Processes Improve the effectiveness and efficiency of campus business processes, including technology enablement.	
Strategic Initiatives	**Summary of results to date**
6.3.1: Review campus business processes and identify those requiring revision.	The Controller's office has eliminated a significant amount of paper files. Documentation to support the payment of an invoice and the related check copy are now stored electronically in a product called On-base. The database has an index which makes searching for documents an easy process. Use of this product results in reduced paper costs and copier costs, while taking up less physical storage space for paper files. For the management of travel expenses and reimbursement, the travel card is now integrated into the Emburse Chrome River product. This process improvement automatically feeds to the ERP system and saves an employee from having to manually create a posting for travel card activity. It also makes monthly travel card reconciliations easier. Training programs have been developed for administrative support staff to gain a better understanding of various workflows that are used by Administration and Finance. Many of these training programs have been recorded and placed in a repository for on-demand access. Additionally, a Microsoft teams forum has been established for those employees who utilize Administration and Finance business processes for discussion.
6.3.2: Ensure delivery of excellent service experiences through ongoing assessment and periodic administrative reviews where possible.	WCU's support units engage in the continuous improvement process each year for the purpose of collecting and analyzing data to measure their unit's performance on several different metrics. A total of 37 support units submitted their continuous improvement reports during academic year 2024-25, representing a response rate of 94%. Each report included an in-depth analysis of data relating to that unit, coupled with suggestions for enhancing future student experiences. Support services units in the Division of Academic Affairs are also part of WCU's internal review process. During these reviews, a unit conducts a self-evaluation of their department, including its history, alignment with WCU's institutional mission, service demand, and cost effectiveness. The unit then hosts an external review team to evaluate operational functions and departmental services. Four units were reviewed this year - Suite 201: CEAP Student Success Center, the Advising Center, Global Engagement, and the Mountain Heritage Center. Each review process resulted in the creation of a Strategic Action Plan outlining tangible steps for future achievements in their respective units.
Goal 6.4 – Information Technology Maintain currency and enable strategic information technology capabilities.	
Strategic Initiatives	**Summary of results to date**
6.4.1: Establish and systematize a sustainable funding model for	Required mandates and contractual cost increases: Despite ongoing efforts, no permanent funding increases were secured this year to address internal mandates or inflationary pressures on supplies, services, and software subscriptions. The Division of IT

information technology that accommodates operational support, replacement and upgrades, University growth, cybersecurity, and strategic initiatives.	continues to mitigate these challenges through strategic use of multi-year contracts to lock in favorable pricing and reliance on one-time funding sources to manage incremental cost increases. A sustainable model must include baseline budget adjustments that account for annual inflation and contractual escalations to avoid reliance on temporary funding. Pawprint: Based on a thorough evaluation of print volumes, targeted tier adjustments were implemented within the self-funded revenue model to ensure continued operational support without reliance on central funding. Security Operations Center: We continue to evaluate advanced tools for real-time monitoring and threat detection. To maintain a secure infrastructure, funding must be allocated for ongoing tool acquisition and staff training to ensure proactive risk management.
6.4.2 Ensure accommodation of mandatory and anticipated information technology needs, including both human resources and technologies through annual capacity planning, strategic management, and process assessments. Incorporate a review of current technologies, evaluating any redundant, obsolete, or underused products into this planning process.	Our Strategic Staffing process identified areas to focus budget dollars from open positions. As a result, dollars were re-directed towards hiring a Business Intelligence Analyst for CATalytics. In the artificial intelligence (AI) space we created a governance group, began literacy trainings, and empowered campus to leverage AI services. Many technologies were upgraded or replaced to take advantage of cost/resource efficiencies, or to avoid vendor end-of-life. They include phones, Zoom, myWCU, Cloud-based services, VCAT, Microsoft Sentinel, and ServiceNow. Progress was also made improving our operational processes, with significant changes being made to how we manage projects (efficiency, resource management, cost avoidance). We also implemented an extensive Cloud cost management capability to monitor and manage Cloud-based services and costs. Considerable progress was once again made by the CATalytics team in helping many groups moved towards data-informed decision making, focusing on Admissions, Student Success, Advancement, Academic operations. An IT-wide program was launched to improve upon endpoint management, looking at process and technology from initial fulfillment to eventual surplus.
Goal 6.5 - Safety, Reliability, and Security Preserve the safety, reliability, and security of the campus community.	
Strategic Initiatives	**Summary of results to date**
6.5.1: Develop and maintain University all-hazards prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery efforts through comprehensive emergency and disaster planning, training, and exercise programs.	During FY 2024-25, the Department of Emergency Services facilitated the update and review of 40 Building Emergency Action Plans for primary buildings at the Cullowhee campus and Biltmore Instructional Site. In Sept. 2024, WCU was impacted by Tropical Storm Helene. Following WCU's response and recovery, the Department led a university wide After-Action Review, which resulted in a report outlining strengths, areas for improvement, and steps for improvement based on lessons learned. In fall 2024, the Department partnered with a UNC System-sponsored consultant and campus planning team to design a comprehensive tabletop exercise for the Executive Crisis Management Team (ECMT), Emergency Operations Team (EOT), and Crisis Communication Team (CCT). This exercise was held on Feb. 2025 and was followed by an After-Action Report and Improvement Plan to enhance preparedness, response, and recovery. Many items in the Improvement Plan have already been addressed or are in the process of being addressed. In January 2025, the EOT completed inaugural training on WCU's Incident Management Software. Enhancements were identified and are being implemented ahead of planned training sessions.
6.5.2: Ensure fiscal stability through systematic maintenance, assessment, repair, and	Strategic management of the university's physical plant infrastructure and technologies is continually addressed through a proactive preventative maintenance program, continued corrective and reactive maintenance activity, and strategic management of its deferred maintenance backlog (or total needs index). Facility condition assessments (FCA) and inspections provide information that assist in annual budget development, carry-forward allocation, and six-year biennial capital planning of repair

	enhancement of all campus infrastructure and technologies.	and renovation (R&R) priorities. Facilities management has contracted with Gordian Group to provide full FCA program and reports to be completed in 2025.
	6.5.3: Engage in an enterprise risk management process to integrate risk awareness into decision making and to minimize surprises by identifying emerging issues.	The biennial risk assessment process for 2025-2026 began in February 2025 with risk identification and assessment. Although the enterprise risk management process addresses all facets of the University, some of this year's top risks are specifically related to preserving the safety, reliability, and security of the campus community. Those identified safety-related risks include: (i) failure to detect and protect against cyber-attacks that could compromise university records, data, and systems; (ii) emergency preparedness, including active shooter, domestic terrorism, and severe adverse weather on campus; and (iii) aging facilities and deferred maintenance of buildings/properties. The Chief Compliance Officer then worked with the Executive Council to identify the responsible EC member and risk owners, who will then work with a team of risk partners to develop a risk management plan to mitigate each of the top risks during the next fiscal year. Risk management plans consider strategic plan goals and are designed to help inform decision making and benchmarking for each strategic goal.
	6.5.4: Maintain and improve technologies and processes related to cybersecurity and privacy to prevent, detect, and respond to incidents.	Improvements were made to the phishing simulation program, which has led to a measurable increase in awareness around phishing risks across the organization. A dated and difficult to manage SIEM system was retired in favor of a more modern and integrated application which resulted in significant improvements in incident detection and logging capabilities. Mitigated the risk of third-party applications acquiring excessive permissions to university data within the M365 cloud environment by implementing a process that requires review and approval before a third-party application can connect. Implemented new identity, authentication, and access management approaches for privileged accounts and access control for our cloud tenant and directory services that are the most secure and phish resistant available. Reduced cyber risk by applying just-in-time (JIT) access controls and a just-enough-privilege (JEP) approach to privileged accounts.

Strategic Direction 7:
Vision Advancement

Accomplishment Highlights

- **Historic Fundraising Success:** Midway through the *Fill the Western Sky Campaign*, the university increased its goal from $75 million to $100 million. The decision followed two of the best fundraising years in WCU history, with fiscal year 2024 bringing in a record $35.8 million and fiscal year 2025 recording over $19.5 million in new commitments.
- **Elevating the WCU Brand:** The *Live Western* brand campaign expanded its reach across North Carolina, guided by a Carnegie perception study to shape messaging around affordability and student success. A major website redesign is underway to better serve prospective students and highlight the university's value proposition.
- **Successful Legislative Advocacy:** New advocacy priorities were endorsed by the Board of Trustees, focusing on critical needs like faculty and staff salaries and campus security infrastructure. WCU secured $2 million for campus infrastructure in the 2025 state disaster relief bill, representing nearly 50% of the requested risk management investments.
- **Driving Innovative Revenue Generation:** WCU continued its partnership with NC Innovation, submitting proposals for funding consideration. Faculty secured nearly $10.3 million in sponsored awards, which included over $2 million in wages and educational awards for students and nearly $1.8 million in faculty salary support.
- **Growing Alumni and Donor Engagement:** The Division of Advancement hosted dozens of hybrid and in-person events to connect with alumni, donors, and friends. Events ranged from Homecoming and New Student Send-offs to campaign events across the state in Highlands, Charlotte, Raleigh, and the Triad, significantly increasing engagement in the life of the university.
- **Strengthening the Athletics Fundraising Model:** The university relocated the Athletics development function to the Division of Advancement. This strategic move aligns resources to more effectively support all fundraising priorities of the *Fill the Western Sky Campaign*, with an increased focus on athletics facility improvements and academic endowments.

Strategic Direction 7: Vision Advancement

We will create and promote a shared understanding of WCU's future around our areas of distinction, student support, and faculty and staff initiatives.

Goal 7.1 – Promote Quality and Excellence

Promote an institutional vision of quality and excellence in academic and administrative programs and activities.

Strategic Initiatives	Summary of results to date
7.1.1: Annually review and enhance messages for new faculty, staff, and students to ensure early introduction to and understanding of the University's strategic vision, history, and culture.	Since July 2024, Western Carolina University has advanced the Live Western brand campaign, enhancing its creative and strategic impact to reflect WCU's identity. The initiative includes a refreshed visual identity and targeted messaging for students, faculty, staff, and partners. Expanded Hickory-area billboards highlight 48% of the Class of 2024 graduating debt-free, emphasizing affordability and WCU's role as a regional comprehensive university. Strategic communications quarterly meetings with director-level leaders connect departments, ensuring consistent messaging about WCU's vision, history, and culture, disseminated to all, including new hires. The 14-month website redesign prioritizes prospective students while shifting internal information to a strengthened intranet, creating a hub for new hires to access resources on WCU's vision and culture. Collaborative efforts with colleges, Student Affairs, and Academic Affairs have refined value propositions, implemented across platforms for a cohesive brand. The revamped site and intranet bring the Catamount story to life with dynamic narratives and visuals, aligning with WCU's values.
7.1.2: Ensure consistency among vision messages from all internal sources to include reinforcement of WCU's role as a regional institution through its involvement in the NC Promise tuition plan and emphasis of UNC-approved institutional areas of distinction.	The WCU mission statement is fully integrated into the website and printed materials. Communications staff in the Chancellor's Office and in University Comms and Marketing ensure consistency of messaging across Chancellor's communications platforms including print and social media and speaking engagements. Additionally, University Communications and Marketing ensures that consistency of messaging is present across all University divisions and institutional marketing and communications, ensuring there is a focus on WCU's value proposition, in marketing and advertisements across the region and state, with prominence in all major NC population centers. The Chancellor continues to represent WCU as a thought leader on higher education affordability and the role of regional universities in various venues. She has now joined the boards for the Asheville Chamber of Commerce and the American Assoc. for State Colleges and Universities. She routinely speaks with elected officials, board members, and governing agencies across the region and state. The Chancellor and other campus leaders routinely are encouraged to include references to debt reduction and affordability in speaking remarks.

Goal 7.2 – Vision and External Communities

Facilitate a shared understanding of the institution’s strategic vision among the University’s external communities.

Strategic Initiatives	Summary of results to date
7.2.1: Create and grow a meaningful hybrid blend of virtual and face-to-face engagement opportunities that equip both alumni and leadership boards to	WCU Advancement hosted dozens of events both in person and virtually. These include traditional events like Family Weekend, Alumni Legacy Pinning Ceremony, New Student Send-offs, Homecoming (including the Friday Parade Party, Alumni Awards Brunch, African-American Alumni Association gathering); leadership/board events focused on board service for the WCU Foundation Board, WCU Alumni Association Board, the Fill the Western Sky (FTWS) Campaign Steering Committee, and the Catamount Club Board; campaign events for large and small groups around the state, including in Highlands, Charlotte, Asheville,

better advocate, serve, and contribute to Western Carolina University.	Raleigh, and the Triad; and one-off alumni engagement events such as Ballparks and Brews, regional alumni gatherings, and alumni "meet-ups" across NC, SC, VA, GA, and Washington, DC; and special trips such as the Catamount Travel Adventures trip to Portugal. Finally, we hosted multiple fundraising-oriented and stewardship days, including Giving Tuesday, One Day for Western, the FTWS Campaign Public Launch, and the Western Skybox groundbreaking ceremony. All these events are focused on engaging with WCU alumni, donors, students/family members, philanthropically and in the life of WCU.
7.2.2: Complete a competitive analysis and external perception research to develop a reputation strategy, and a current market analysis to tailor the university's messaging accordingly.	Launched in November 2023, the Live Western brand campaign has expanded its reach and relevance across North Carolina, reinforcing our commitment to affordability, student success, and unique value. We refreshed the campaign's creative direction and messaging, guided by insights from the Carnegie perception study, which provided a deep understanding of how key audiences view WCU. This data shaped our outreach, ensuring alignment with institutional priorities like access and student outcomes. A major milestone is the soon-to-launch institutional website, redesigned to better serve prospective students while enhancing the experience for current students, faculty, staff, and community partners. The site will highlight student voices, showcase our vibrant campus, and emphasize affordability, playing a central role in telling WCU's story. As we grow brand awareness, we're preparing a follow-up perception study to evaluate progress, identify gaps, and refine our reputation strategy. The study will provide fresh insights into WCU's perception across the state, ensuring our messaging resonates effectively and supports our strategic goals for deeper connection and impact in the years ahead.

Goal 7.3 – Mix of Financial Resources

Maximize and target a balanced and diverse mix of financial resources that will enable achievement of the University's strategic vision.

Strategic Initiatives	Summary of results to date
7.3.1. Explore innovative revenue generation strategies to minimize the cost of higher education to students, as far as practicable.	Midway through year six of the Fill the Western Sky Campaign, WCU increased the campaign goal from $75M to $100M, following the largest fundraising year in the University's history, $35.8M in fiscal year 2024. Fiscal year 2025 brought the third largest fundraising year in university history, over $19.5M in commitments. WCU continued its partnership with NC Innovation, with three proposals from WCU faculty and collaborators considered for funding in Spring, 2025. WCU continues its relationship with the US Economic Development Administration and expects to receive funding for repairs and modifications to the Cullowhee Dam in Fall 2025. Additional EDA funding is being considered in support of the new Engineering building, currently in the design phase. Sponsored Awards - Faculty salaries in FY 25 = $1,792,143 from 59 grants - Student salaries in FY 25 = $300,179 from 33 grants - Students supported with "Other Educational Awards: = $1,660,083 across 11 grants Sponsored Proposals - Faculty requested to support 59 Graduate Students + 138 Undergraduate Students with student wages at a total of $926,858 across 39 proposals. - $3,241,215 was requested to support student scholarships across 16 proposals.
7.3.2: Implement a comprehensive plan to significantly increase the	New advocacy priorities endorsed by Trustees in December 2024, reflect critical investments such as Faculty and Staff salary adjustments, scope changes for the new Engineering Building, Catamount Laboratory school operational issues, and campus

advocacy efforts among elected officials on behalf of university and system priorities, adjusting as necessary due to shifts in the external or political landscapes.	security infrastructure needs identified during Hurricane Helene. A delayed state budget process has nearly $64 million in priorities, as well as changes for the NC Promise tuition program, pending as the process continues forward. WCU has received $2m for campus infrastructure in the 2025 disaster relief bill, just under 50% of our requested risk management investments. Federal education and student financial aid funding structures experienced a notable change model this reporting cycle, requiring consistent interaction with Congressional and Federal agency partners to navigate a season of change and uncertainty. WCU enhanced advocacy efforts this cycle by engaging students at the North Carolina General Assembly (NCGA) to deliver metrics on student success and the value of higher education. WCU co-hosted a legislative engagement with ASU and UNCA to acknowledge the value of the NCGA's student relief funds following Hurricane Helene.
7.3.3: Seek private support through philanthropic gifts and grants to increase support for academic excellence and the student experience, diversity, equity, and inclusion, regional engagement, athletic facilities, unrestricted annual support, and other philanthropic priorities to increase the baseline of philanthropic support.	In January of 2025, midway through year six of the Fill the Western Sky Campaign, the decision was made to increase the campaign goal from $75M to $100M. This decision followed the largest fundraising year in the University's history, $35.8 million in fiscal year 2024. Fiscal year 2025 brought the third-largest fundraising year in university history, recording over $19.5 Million in commitments with increased focus on athletics facility improvements and academic excellence endowments. At the start of fiscal year 2025, the decision was made to relocate the Athletics development function from the division of athletics to the division of advancement. Since that time, the university has sought to align all resources to effectively support ALL fundraising priorities of the campaign and the University. The division of advancement leads this work, in close collaboration with each supported unit.
7.3.4: Increase the number, value, and competitiveness of sponsored research proposals while increasing research support and productivity.	In fiscal year 2025, WCU faculty and staff submitted 102 grant proposals totaling over $20M, a 6.25% increase from the previous year, and received 70 awards totaling $10,299,571, marking a 49% increase from fiscal year 2024's $6.9M. The Office of Research Administration (ORA) funded 13 Provost Scholarship Development Grants totaling $159,906 to support research aimed at future external funding. Additionally, the Chancellor and Provost committed $100K for Hurricane Helene Mitigation research in WNC. The Research Programs Coordinator expanded internal and external initiatives to promote student scholarship, research, and creative activity. ORA also led one internal white paper review to select a competitive proposal for the UNC URPA call. Efforts to grow the number, value, and competitiveness of sponsored projects remain a strategic priority.