

Western Carolina University Had Record Enrollment For Spring Semester

By Administrator

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For the first time in Western Carolina University's history, spring semester enrollment has exceeded 11,000 students, thanks to healthy increases in the number of new graduate students, new undergraduate transfer students and first-time freshmen returning after their initial fall semester. Enrollment for the 2019 spring semester stands at 11,028, up by 799 students (or nearly 8 percent) over last spring's previous record of 10,229, according to preliminary census data compiled by WCU's Office of Institutional Planning and Effectiveness.

The fall-to-spring retention rate – that is, the rate at which first-time full-time freshmen return to the university for the spring semester – continued to hold steady at better than 91 percent.

Interim Chancellor Alison Morrison-Shetlar attributed the steady increase in both the number of students enrolling at WCU and the academic qualifications of those students to the university's rising stature in terms of academic quality and visibility across the state.

“Another semester of record-breaking enrollment is the result of a lot of hard work from many, many people across the campus, from our undergraduate and graduate student recruiters to all of those who are managing and maintaining student success through high-quality experiences in and out of the classroom,” Morrison-Shetlar said. “I'm especially pleased to see the strong trend among continuing students as that is a reflection of progress toward degree and, ultimately, of student satisfaction with the quality of the total student experience at Western Carolina University.”

The new spring enrollment high-water mark comes on the heels of a fall semester that saw the third consecutive year of record enrollment growth, with a total student headcount of 11,639. Spring enrollment numbers at institutions of higher education typically are a bit lower than fall enrollment as some students graduate in the middle of the academic year while others do not return for a second semester for reasons ranging from academic to personal, university officials say. This spring's record enrollment comes even after a December commencement ceremony that included recognition of some 765 students in the fall 2018 graduating class.

Total Graduate School enrollment grew from 1,571 last spring to 1,629 this spring (an uptick of 3.7 percent), with a sizeable increase in the number of new graduate students. Preliminary census numbers indicate that 201 new graduate students are enrolled at WCU for the current spring semester, up 31 students (or by more than 18 percent) from last spring.

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Graduate degree programs with the highest overall growth include project management, sport management, school administration, elementary and middle grades education, construction management, health sciences, chemistry and public affairs, as well as WCU's doctoral program in educational leadership. (Read more about the growth in graduate programs.)

Those growing programs represent a mix of residential programs in Cullowhee, programs based at WCU's Biltmore Park instructional site in Asheville, fully online programs and hybrid programs that combine face-to-face classes with online instruction, said Brian Kloeppel, WCU's Graduate School and Research dean.

"We believe the growth in each of these graduate programs underscores WCU's focus on offering programs that meet the educational needs of our students, the region and the state," Kloeppel said. "Middle grades education, for example, is one of the state's highest demand teaching roles. Here in Western North Carolina, nonprofit and public sector executives, scientists, health care administrators, school principals – all of these are areas where there is significant job demand."

On the undergraduate side of the equation, the number of new transfer students for spring semester stands at 494, up nearly 37 percent from last spring's total of 361 new transfer students. The total undergraduate population for spring semester is 9,399, an increase of more than 8.5 percent over last spring's tally of 8,658 undergrads for spring semester. Distance education experienced a nearly 12 percent increase in enrollment, from 1,975 students last spring to 2,211 students this semester.

University officials continue to point to several reasons for WCU's surge in enrollment in recent years, including the addition of high-demand degree programs, excellent faculty, interest in the Pride of the Mountains Marching Band, the growth of the Honors College, and new and renovated residence halls and dining facilities providing the type of amenities sought by today's students.

Another factor having an impact beginning this academic year is the new NC Promise tuition plan, which, starting last fall, lowers the line-item cost of tuition to \$500 per semester for North Carolina residents and \$2,500 per semester for out-of-state students at WCU and two other University of North Carolina System schools.

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“We have been on a steady growth trajectory for the past decade, and the greater affordability provided by NC Promise is resulting in a bit of a boost,” said Phil Cauley, assistant vice chancellor for undergraduate enrollment. “One of the factors seems to be favorable word-of-mouth from current students, who have good things to say to their friends at home about their academic experiences, the extracurricular activities and the affordability of being an NC Promise campus.”

With the spring semester in full swing, WCU already is looking toward the 2019 fall semester and next year’s freshman class. The university will hold undergraduate Open House events on two Saturdays – Feb. 23 and March 23 – to give interested students and their families an opportunity to tour the campus, learn about the university’s award-winning programs and find out about important topics such as financial aid.

Registration for undergraduate Open House and more information are available by going to the website openhouse.wcu.edu or by calling the Office of Undergraduate Admissions at 828-227-7317 or toll-free 877-928-4968.

Prospective graduate students can visit with faculty and learn about educational opportunities at graduate Open House events in Cullowhee and at the WCU instructional site in Asheville at Biltmore Park. For dates and additional information, visit the website gradopenhouseinfo.wcu.edu.

For more information about graduate programs, visit the Graduate School website grad.wcu.edu, email grad@wcu.edu or call 828-227-7398.