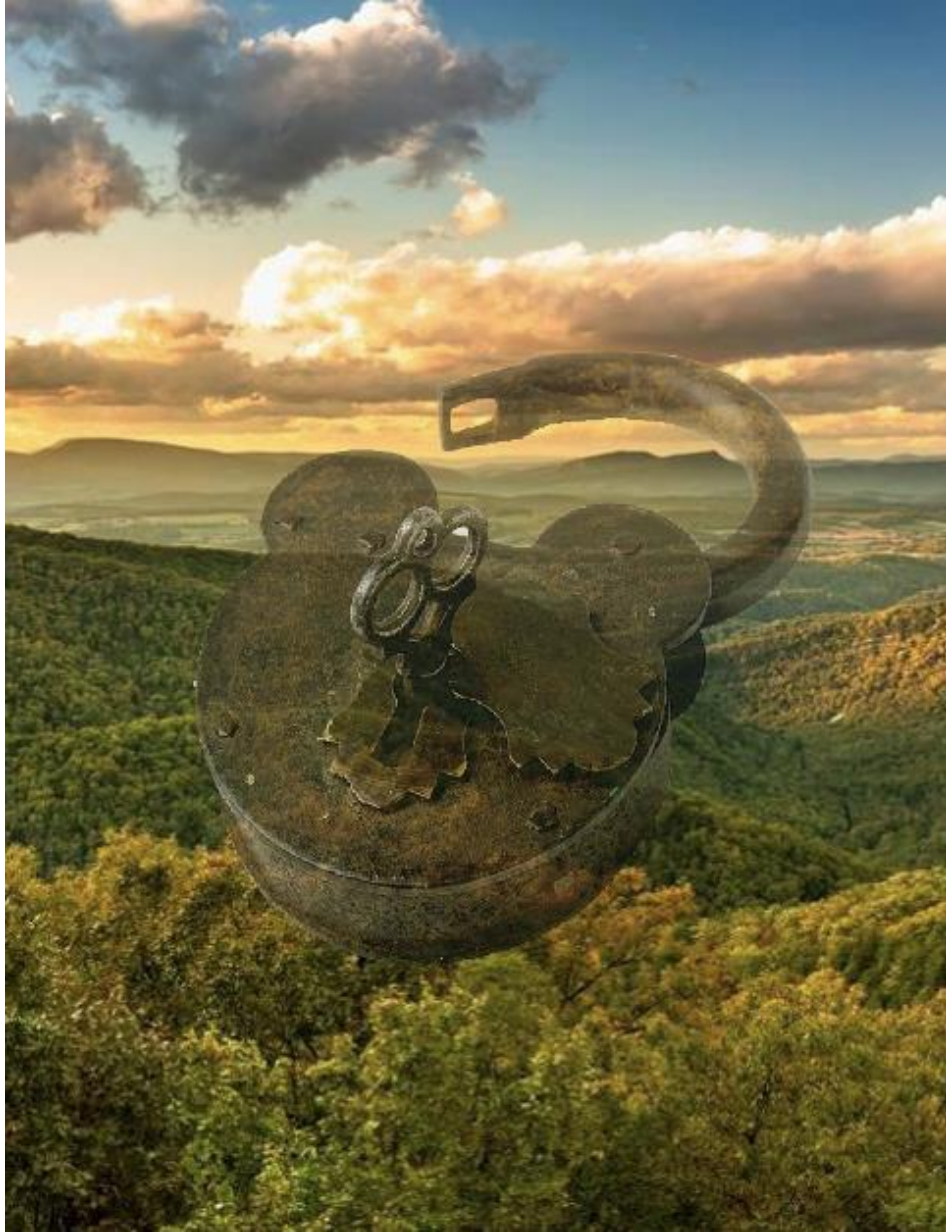


Unlocking the Region



College of Business Special Topics Class – ENT/MGT 493

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INTRODUCTION



Western Carolina University takes pride in being a regional institution for the westernmost counties in North Carolina. Community engagement is a vital component in fulfilling that title and considers it one of the important aspects of a student's academic learning.

Regional development strives to improve the wellbeing and quality of living of its people through sustainable growth, and one of the first and a key foundational step in regional development is to gain a clear understanding of regional challenges, needs, and potential before attempting to act and solve problems. With this in mind, the special topics course was designed to enhance students' problem-solving skills of complex challenges by engaging in regional development field work in Western North Carolina.

The project selected came from an on-going initiative called CREATE BRIDGES, an acronym that stands for **Celebrating REtail, Accommodations, Tourism, and Entertainment by Building Rural Innovations and Developing Growth EconomicS**. This program develops planning and training focused on the retail, accommodations, tourism and entertainment” sectors in rural areas around the United States. In 2020, the Mountain West Region of North Carolina was selected to participate in the CREATE BRIDGES program and through collaboration with various partners, a strategic plan was created. One of the plan's goals for the initiative included an action to conduct “Secret Shopper” research. The College of Business faculty identified the secret shopping program as an opportunity to utilize student resources that would add momentum to an already-existing initiative seeking to increase regional economic development.



Thus, the desirable outcome of this semester-long project is to:

Identify and develop solutions to address gaps between regional development priorities (current and historic) and regional needs and competences (residents, consumers, businesses, culture, ...) that may be causing the barriers to the implementation of economic development priorities in the region.

Project Components

Part I: Secondary Research: Macro Knowledge of the Region

- ***Economic Development Plans-*** The team gathered foundational information by analyzing current economic development reports on the state, regional, and county levels. The regional and county specific strategic economic development reports were cross examined to find trends and identify gaps amongst the reports.
- ***CREATE BRIDGES Program Plan-*** The team gathered foundational information from the website and the 2021 Project Near-End report to better understand the CREATE BRIDGES Initiative and their regional and county economic development plans for the Western North Carolina Region., the Mountain West NC CREATE BRIDGES was reviewed and analyzed.

Part II: Primary Research: Micro knowledge of regional key players

- ***Expert Panel:*** The team enhanced their understanding of economic development by conducting a panel discussion with experienced economic development leaders in the region. The panels conducted were specifically targeted towards a macro view of region, counties, and Western Carolina University's role in the region. The information gathered from the economic development leaders in Region A helped form the foundational primary data that allowed the team to formulate more targeted questions to gather information on the micro knowledge of the region.
- ***Client Interview:*** The team enhanced their understanding of the CREATE BRIDGES program and client expectations for the secret shopper initiative through conducting an interview with the current program managers of CREATE BRIDGES in NC.
- ***Focus Groups-*** The team conducted four focus groups to gain firsthand knowledge from their point of view about the area. The four different focus group participants were comprised of individuals from the region that represented WCU students, experienced local realtors, faculty that work in the region but choose to commute from elsewhere, and residents who frequently host guests. The goal was to understand in what areas the region is exceeding or meeting its economic development goals and the things that may be improved, according to those that have a close relationship with and are vested in the region. The participants were asked a series of open-ended questions that addressed common themes on their experiences of life in the region to garner their assessment of where the region is succeeding and where it may be improved. The data was aggregated

and analyzed to find common trends, both positive and negative, amongst the commentary from the focus groups.

- ***Secret Shopper:*** The team conducted over 120 local small business secret shopper visits to observe and assess a preset list of factors without revealing they are gathering data. The student researchers gathered data by dining, browsing retailers, and participating in entertainment activities to gather both qualitative and quantitative data regarding the businesses. Data was collected across the region for four main categories of businesses including Food and Beverage, Lodging, Entertainment and Retail. Some of the things assessed were the average age of the patrons, the ease of locating the business, the customer service experience, and the business' online presence. (See appendix for complete list factors) The data was compiled for each category using a Qualtrics survey form. The goal of secret shopping was to collect data regarding how the overall category of businesses were doing across the region and identify areas they could potentially improve or be assisted. After analyzing the information gathered, the team was able to identify common areas of improvement among many businesses, as well as common aspects where businesses within the region are excelling.

Part III: Research Analysis

- ***Quantitative and Qualitative Data:*** The data collected from the economic development leader panel, client interview, focus group forum, and secret shopping assessment was first broken up into quantitative and qualitative data. This aggregation of data was broken down into individual parts (focus group, panel, etc.), analyzed, and the resulting data was then compared to the other methods that were used to gather data.
- ***Identify Themes:*** That comparison revealed overarching themes that were present across multiple forms of data harvested from both primary and secondary sources of information. The goal was to identify potential areas that would both increase economic development and assist the small business community then, propose solutions that might be implemented to support or improve those areas.
- ***Resource Analysis:*** A final analysis was performed to better understand how the major stakeholders of the region (residents, students, visitors, and businesses) might work together to help one another reach the economic development goals for the region.

Part IV: Proposed Recommendations

As a result of the analysis, the team was able to identify and recommend three immediate (under 1 year) priorities, two short term priorities (1-3 years), and one long term priority (3-5 years or

more) for potential areas of improvement to create a positive impact on the local economy. The recommendations also include suggestions for actions of implementation, the resources necessary to realize the priorities and expected outcomes if successful.

The following report details the findings of the extensive semester-long research compiled by the student team in the special topics course titled “Community Engagement”. Another interesting note is that the report was named “Unlocking the Region” by the students. The name stems from their experiential journey of uncovering nuggets of information that was unknown to them about the region even though some had lived here almost four years. They likened it to a video game where you finally have enough points to move into another level and are full of anticipation for what the next unexpected experience might bring.

Part I: MACRO KNOWLEDGE OF THE REGION

Insights from the Economic Development Reports

Region A consists of the seven western most counties of North Carolina. For the purposes of this report, information was collected for part of the region called the Mountain-West region that includes the four contiguous counties of Macon, Swain, Jackson and Graham. Regional economic development growth relies heavily on tourism. Over the past five years, two-thirds of the region's economic growth has hailed from recreation, food service and accommodations, and retail trade, due to the area's economic reliance upon tourism (Region A 2020, 2). Many people are drawn to these counties due to the natural beauty of the Appalachian Mountains affording many outdoor activities such as flyfishing, whitewater rafting, hiking, biking, and sightseeing. Commercial activity comes mostly from small businesses developed into towns and cities that offer a friendly, small-town feel for visitors to enjoy a more relaxed pace of life.

Regional Challenges

According to regional economic developers, the region faces many unique challenges that prevent commercial growth such as:

- 1) Topography**-This is a prevalent hurdle that has exacerbated other barriers to economic development such as public transportation, sufficient broadband access, and land development. The uneven terrain, drastic slopes, and land protected by the national parks and wildlife management has introduced challenges for expansion and accommodation for businesses and citizens within the region. If the land is unusable, the region has a limited ability for the tourism industry to grow through development of additional retail businesses, lodging accommodations and workforce housing.
- 2) Broadband Internet Access** - As society moves toward a more digital dependent lifestyle, it is important that businesses can adapt to the changes that this digital age requires business to be done. The southwestern region of North Carolina's ability to do this has proven difficult. The broadband access problem includes both internet connectivity speeds and cell service access due to lack of signal infrastructure. This affects finding a business location and interferes with digital transactions to both order supplies and receive customer payments. Another trend arose during the Covid-19 pandemic in which some jobs were still able to be done remotely causing individuals to seek areas to work where they would enjoy living. The unreliable broadband and limited housing availability will discourage potential workers from relocating in the region and cause them to look elsewhere instead.

- 3) **Housing-** Another evident challenge that has been highlighted by both economic development reports and leaders is a lack of accommodations and housing across the region. A great number of the tourism based employees hired to work in the region have difficulties finding an affordable place to live. The interesting and worrying part is that many of the professional employees with higher paying jobs are also finding housing challenging and resorting to living in other counties outside the region. This affects both recruiting and retaining a local workforce. The challenge stems from investors and homeowners buying moderate housing and converting them into vacation rentals to maximize income.
- 4) **The Workforce-** According to the state-wide economic development report, North Carolina has a limited workforce and low jobseekers to job postings. This causes small businesses to have challenges finding and retaining skilled labor. (State of NC Economic Overview, April 21, p.7) In addition, there is a very limited amount of available housing that is affordable to the workforce that makes retention of good employees difficult. Another factor stems from the lack of industry diversity which limits the number of entry level professional positions. This limited job market and below average wages within the tourism sector cause young, educated workers to leave the area for better career opportunities.
- 5) **The Population-** The low population density makes for a difficult return on investment for potential cell service and broadband providers, should they choose to improve their services in the Region. The population is highly dispersed and despite an increase in the population growth rate for the region of 5.3% that stands well above the national average of 1.1%, Region A still only houses 2% of North Carolina's entire population within a seven-county area (Region A 2020, 8). While there are similarities within the four counties, each has its own unique challenges. Graham County's public land area exceeds 80%, limiting land available for development and revenue generation from property taxes (T. Henry, personal communication, September 6, 2022). Conversely, Macon County has a gentler topography, with greater amounts of agricultural land, but along with Swain and Graham County, they have lost a considerable amount of large manufacturing jobs in the past decade (Region A 2020, 15). The effects of lost industry and poor infrastructure, coupled with low population density have caused this area of Western North Carolina to be overlooked by both government and corporations alike, resulting in 30.4% of children and one out of every five individuals in Region A living below the poverty line (Region A 2020, 9).
- 6) **Different County Governments-**Each county has separate government agencies that make communication between leaders, helpful programs and services, businesses, and

schools a major hurdle. During the panel with Mr. Rich Price, Ms. Tiffany Henry, and Mr. Russ Harris, poor communication was brought up several times. Mr. Price and Ms. Henry specifically spoke about how there are many programs and services that wish to help the businesses and members of the community; however, most do not know about them due to a lack of effective advertising of these services. In addition, the counties of Jackson, Graham, Swain, and Macon not combining their marketing to attract more tourists. While many tourists come for the rafting, fishing, and waterfalls, there are many attractions that are lesser known to people from outside the area. This can lead to a lot of missed opportunities for increasing revenue. This also ties into the counties working together to market themselves as a fun region to visit, where tourists can spend time at attractions in one county for a few hours and then travel a short distance to more attractions in a different county. One prime example of good marketing of a region is Pigeon Forge, Gatlinburg, Dollywood, and Knoxville areas, which all advertise each other to their guests and band together to make longer-distance advertisements together.

Regional Opportunities

On the other hand, the region is in a very strategic location on the east coast of the United States that allows a large portion of the population to travel to the area within a day's drive. ([MountainWest Partnership | \(govnc.org\)](http://MountainWestPartnership.govnc.org)) There are many strengths within the region currently used to attract this tourist market and solidify this industry as the leading driver of economic development in the region.



- 1) Natural resources-** The natural beauty of the mountainous region and the mild temperate climate creates a strong draw for eco-tourism to support the economy. Each year, more people have been attracted to visit the region and this could be observed especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when some other industries and places took a big hit, the outdoor tourism was much more appreciated.
- 2) Rich Historic and Cultural Heritage-** The region of southwestern North Carolina is very proud of its historic and cultural heritage. Not only is this region home to the Eastern band of Cherokee Indians with a nationally known Harrah's Casino, but there are also many museums and annual festivals in each of the counties that celebrate the history and culture of the mountains and its people. It is also very common to see farmers and artisans from the region selling their wares at the festivals and regional farmers markets.

These festivals and markets showcase small, unique, businesses within the area, providing another draw for the tourist industry.

3) Secondary Education Facilities- The region includes three accredited higher education facilities to educate and train the workforce. Western Carolina University has over 10,000 undergraduate and graduate students from all over the country as well as international students. In addition, there are two community colleges that serve the region for special technical and industry training programs and college preparatory degrees. They include Southwestern Community College serving Jackson, Macon, and Swain counties and Tri-county Community College serving Graham County. Institutions like this can offer many different opportunities and resources for the region's economic development. Students from these institutions represent a skilled workforce that is willing to work with the community if opportunities were available related to their field of study.

4) Collaboration- According to economic development experts, county leaders have realized the need to band together as a region to solve their common challenges of infrastructure, tourism, transportation, and educational services. They have collaborated to develop the Mountain West Partnership. The regional emphasis is on improving access to broadband, improving transportation services, and increasing the availability of affordable housing (Region A 2020, 14). Bolstering small business ventures, diversifying industry, and improving the downtowns within the counties are also a heavy focus for economic leaders, in an effort to boost tourism and attract skilled workers to the region. To achieve these goals, economic development experts, alongside initiatives working to address Region A's needs, have concluded that better communication and coordination throughout the region are necessary to ensure we are all moving in the same direction. Another great example is a social media group called Sylva Shopping Support. -This group is dedicated to helping businesses and community members within Sylva by allowing them to share their resources and advertise the products and services that they offer. The group, which is on both Facebook and Instagram, was created by Elissa Hashemi, who works with CREATE Bridges with the goal of helping the Sylva community build synergy by making them aware of businesses for partnership opportunities such as sharing workers in times of need, and cooperative advertising of special events.

5) Strong Existing Tourism Base- Another factor that is working within this four county region is the nature-based tourism. This region depends heavily on tourism that comes from its natural resources, such as waterfalls, campgrounds, rivers for fishing and rafting, and much more. Attracting tourists using these resources also boosts the hotels, restaurants, and other hospitality businesses in the area, leading to more revenue being brought into the communities. With this dependency on tourism also comes an occupancy

that is paid directly to the county’s Tourism Development Authority and can be used to assist with marketing and communication.



As a result of these challenges and opportunities, the area qualified for a business support program called CREATE BRIDGES that aims to increase economic development by supporting local businesses within the area by offering training and other technical resources. The acronym stands for “Celebrating REtail, Accommodations, Tourism, and

Entertainment by Building Rural Innovations and Developing Growth Economics. According to their website, the overall goal of the initiative is to:

- “Raise awareness of the role these important businesses play in the local economy”
- “Determine challenges and barriers negatively impacting those businesses”
- “Develop and implement strategies to strengthen the retail, accommodations, tourism, and entertainment sectors within a region.”

CREATE BRIDGES has collaborated with economic agencies in the region including WCU’s College of Business to utilize student resources to collect research to strengthen this major segment of tourism related businesses that are economically vital to southwestern part of North Carolina.

Regional Potential

1) Coordinated Marketing Collaboration-The Western North Carolina region holds a great deal of untapped potential. With the close proximity of Jackson, Macon, Swain, and Graham counties as well as the similarities of issues and gaps, a marketing collaboration between the counties has a substantial amount of promise that can be beneficial the entire region.

2) Diversify Economic Development Efforts to Include Related Manufacturing - “Over the last five years, eleven industry sectors have added employment in Region A (Table 5). However, two have contributed 65 percent of all gains; Arts, Entertainment & Recreation and Accommodation & Food Services” (Region A, 2017). With tourism on the rise, leaders in the region need to ask if resources should be contributed to continuing this growth, or if there is an opportunity to use the region's unique position as an ecotourism destination to help promote the economy as a whole. With the abundance of natural resources and parks that provide many attractions and recreational activities from fishing, hunting, hiking, biking, and white water rafting, there is a considerable market for manufacturing and selling products such as mountain bikes and canoes for the area. One aspect of development that disappointed Mr. Harris was

stagnated growth in the manufacturing sector for his region. The Southwestern region of North Carolina could use its position in ecotourism to create a sustainable economy in the area. Tourism could be used to develop an industry network where businesses support one another. Manufacturing businesses could be made for these outdoor activities such as kayaks, mountain bikes, and hiking equipment manufacturing. The region could expand beyond this, adding maintenance stores, competitive sporting facilities (for outdoor activities that bring people into the region), and even workforce development for these specifically skilled jobs. This could promote more economic sustainability by stretching industry share, boost economic standing by creating exports instead of the need for imports, and may even take away stress from a failing supply chain.

3) University Resources- WCU is a large economic driver in the region with over 11,000 students and over 3,000 faculty and staff. ([Western Carolina University - Fast Facts \(wcu.edu\)](https://www.wcu.edu)) It is considered a regional university with a mission for community outreach and engagement. The university has the capacity to influence the path of economic development for the region if an avenue to access the various resources can be developed between the regional county leaders and WCU. Mr. Rich Price, WCU's Executive Director for Economic Development stated, "Keeping us plugged into opportunities is critical." He describes the University's desire to "be at the table" with economic development leaders in the area, but this is not always the case. Some uses of Western as a resource were described in the regional and Jackson County economic development reports that highlight difficulties in obtaining and retaining a skilled workforce. Why is this the case when WCU, a growing higher education institution, is drawing students from across the United States? Why aren't these students staying in the area, and what can the university do to keep them here? As part of the course project, there will be focus groups conducted with multiple regional stakeholders including students. Hopefully, we can answer these questions by learning about their personal opinions and experiences with the region.

4) Existing Small Business Technical Programs- Both the University and the Community College have business assistance programs that offer critical resources for starting new businesses and training programs for existing businesses. Employee retention training might be developed and delivered for frontline workers to prepare them with essential skills while owners and managers are assisted with planning and developing internal programs for employee benefits and incentives to boost the quality and effectiveness of the business. It seems there is a lack of knowledge that these resources exist due to a lack of marketing the services. According to Tiffany Henry, a former leader of the small business center in Jackson County, she stated, "I was a banker before I worked at the small business center. ... how many times do I wish I could have given business loans to small business owners, but they had no business plan. They didn't know where to start. I didn't know there was a small business center." (Henry, 2022). If these centers were marketed effectively by the higher education facilities, more entrepreneurs could be better prepared to start and grow new businesses.

Regional Gaps

The gaps are in funding, collaboration, marketing/advertising, and general interest in students who are willing to work within the county or neighboring county for internship opportunities. The goal at the end of it all is to garner more interest within the community in the projects that are being developed. There is also the goal of building a workforce, but the workforce is already in Jackson County, they just don't know that they could have an opportunity to find a job here.

Housing Gap- The third goal of the regional comprehensive economic development is about creating a revitalized, healthy, and resilient community (pg. 20-21). The gap here is housing because it is an interconnected challenge with every goal. The panelists all mentioned that the biggest struggle is housing, and how it affects every other goal in the plan. Without available housing for the workforce, they will seek employment elsewhere thus the challenge to retain them long-term will be a continuous issue thus negatively impacting the goal of developing a community.

Communication Gap- The collaboration and communication of these counties have limited regional resources to create and fund an advertising campaign to help bring these communities together. This gap is caused by different governing agencies that have different goals and priorities. The reality of it all is that the goals of the economic development plan are realistically unrealistic, in a way that the focus is too big. They wanted to create a marketing campaign to support existing businesses and new businesses, but there are no funds for that marketing or people qualified enough to take on that job. Elissa Hashemi is currently running an Instagram account called *sylvashoppingsupport*, and that within itself is creating a small-scale form of marketing for the locals and students who live here. There is no large-scale account that is reaching broader audiences outside the Sylva region. The communication gap is also demonstrated in the way that Western Carolina University students aren't made aware of the businesses outside of campus or shown forms of entertainment around and off campus. Some of these students don't know that there are trails on campus and 30-40 minutes away from campus that are fun and perfect places for pictures to post on Instagram and could promote them with their network that might reach all over the world.

Broadband Gap- Some communication is limited with inadequate broadband being supplied to these areas. The broadband problem is another area that exasperates many of the gaps in the areas economic development goals and is not in the control of the county leaders since the companies that provide broadband do not have enough of a ROI to provide the resource to the region.

Funding Gap- Funding is also a struggle for some of these counties as they do not have as much of a tax base due to the amount of federal and state owned property. Without a substantial tax base, the local government has limited funds to support projects to improve the infrastructure

that would enhance commercial building conditions and improve the services to the residents. This tax base could be raised by increasing the population in the counties. However, they will need more development of residential housing to provide a workforce to a diverse base of industries and thus increasing incentives to live in the area.

Since there is a lack of housing in many of the counties this is another gap that reduces their ability to grow and increase the tax base. Without adequate housing, this leads to higher turnover in employment. The low wages of businesses in these counties also keep them from retaining skilled workers as they end up moving on to better-paying jobs in different areas. The reason there is a lack of housing in these counties is because of how expensive it is to develop land in these counties. The land is expensive to develop because of how sloped it is, how dense the trees are, and because lack of ability to get commodities like water and sewer to the area.

Insights for the CREATE BRIDGES Project

Some of the most interesting insights that we have found are how heavily reliant on tourism all the counties under our purview are. Most of their revenue comes from tourism, and this leads to many businesses just shutting down for the “off-season,” which hurts the communities that they are in because this limits jobs and services throughout the year.

Due to this region's natural beauty, there is a large tourist market which is supported by the small businesses in the area. The fact that these businesses pay a lower wage with few, if any, benefits, and work on a seasonal basis does not provide a career path for professional minded individuals who are not interested in owning a business. Property/Homeowners would rather turn accommodations into vacation homes for tourists instead of renting to local residents which has limited the availability of affordable housing for the workforce. For economic growth within the region efforts to attract more tourists is necessary and a larger workforce will be required. With these increases, how could businesses continue to support customer service? Employees will require higher wages to pay housing expenses, if housing is available at the time. Or could these increases damage the reputation of the area and destroy consumer confidence in visiting southwestern NC?

While this region is facing many challenges, CREATE BRIDGES is optimistic about finding solutions that would strengthen businesses. CREATE BRIDGES has taken steps towards getting to understand the people and businesses by going out into the region and discussing what people here really want in hopes to provide guidance for growth in the economic development.

Part II: MICRO KNOWLEDGE OF REGIONAL KEY PLAYERS

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Focus Group Key Takeaways - WCU Students

What are most valued when living, working and/or visiting the region, reasons and impacts?

According to the student focus group, there are three major values to living and attending college in the Western North Carolina region. Beauty of the region, the proximity to their family, and the degrees/programs offered by Western Carolina University. All focus group members discussed these topics to some extent, and therefore had the largest correlation.



Beauty of the region- When discussing the beauty of the region, most group members focused on natural beauty, such as the mountains, the views, and the fall season. When prompted about this beauty, student 5 said, “I love it here. The area is just great.” Student 2 discussed her visit to Jackson County during “leaf season” being one of the driving factors in her decision to attend Western Carolina University. Hiking played a major role in extracurricular activities for group members. Whenever they had free time, most would go out on trails that they had heard about from friends.

Proximity of family- All group members were within a three-hour drive from family, excluding one. However, that member (student 4), said that she had followed her significant other to the region. This could also be construed as family. When discussing where the group members’ visiting family stayed, student 3 pointed out his grandparents’ home in Cashiers, only a thirty-minute drive from the university. Other than this, most members stated that when visiting family, or when family came to visit them, it could be done as a day trip.

Degrees/programs-WCU seems to offer many prestigious degree opportunities, according to group members. Student 1 suggested that his number one reason for attending Western was the school’s music program. Student 3 said that the undergraduate engineering program was great. Along with prestige programs, group members seemed to agree that costs were a deciding factor.

What must change to improve the lives of key stakeholders?

As much as students from the focus group enjoyed the area, there were some key challenges they faced, which will prevent them from staying in the area in the future. These include wages and overall job opportunities, internet and cellular service, and a lack of indoor entertainment activities. These issues lead to a basic lack of the living standard required by group members.

Wages-Every member from the focus group worked part or full time. These jobs ranged from on-campus to short commutes to Sylva, and even some longer commutes to the Cashiers area. Even though members all worked, they cited a lack of sufficient wages. Student 4 believed her job at Wal-Mart was “the highest paying job in Sylva (referencing student obtainable jobs)”. Group members agreed that wages were better in Southern Jackson County (the Cashiers region), with students 2 and 5 claiming to have or have had a job in that area. However, members concurred that the commute was not worth the extra pay. On-campus jobs were generally considered low paying, and not worth the amount of stress they gave.

Job opportunities-Students were also concerned about the lack of job positions in their degree field for after they graduated. Many believed there were no opportunities for them in the Western North Carolina region, or that they had a lack of information to find them. When asked if they would stay in the area if the position offered the possibility of remote work, all members agreed they would rather work on-site; businesses in these “expertise” fields would have to be in the region.

Broadband/Cell Service-Throughout Report 1 and the research gathered from all focus groups, insufficient internet and lack of reliable cell service has been a common problem for the region. Student 6 cited this as her main reason she would not stay in the area. Specifically, “I (student 6), want to be able to call or text my friends without looking for service.” This example was given in relation to a time when she was studying in her dorm and had no service. Other members agreed that the lack of Wi-Fi and service were an annoyance.

Night-life- Although the prevalence of outdoor activities was a positive for group members, they were concerned about the lack of indoor activities. This includes the lack of “night-life”, with members wanting more places they can gather with their friends after dark. It is important to note that some of these members did not know about indoor activities that were already offered in the region. Student 4 suggested that a Barcade would do well in the region and help get students off-campus. Group members agreed that they would be willing to drive upwards of thirty minutes to go to a Barcade, which spans almost the entire region from where the campus is located.

Parent visits- It should also be included that if families decided to stay overnight in the region, and had no residence in the area, it could be quite difficult to find hotels to stay in. Student 1 said that when his parents came to visit, they would look for hotels in all counties of the Southwestern North Carolina region because they were either all booked or too expensive. There are over 10,000 students attending WCU, and if all of their families plan to visit (which is drawn from the fact that all focus group members' families did), then there is a major need for lodging improvement.

Gaps in Expectations & Realities Within Region

By listening to the students in the focus group we were able to uncover some gaps in expectations and realities that the students have for the region.

Knowledge of Area-There is not enough marketing being done to educate new students that come to WCU. We can conclude this because a lot of the suggestions for entertainment or cuisines that the students mentioned already exist. The students are not educated enough about what there is to do or eat in the area. For instance, the students mention that they really want chain restaurants in the area such as Olive Garden. We have concluded that this might be due to them only wanting to go to places that they are familiar with, because they haven't explored the area. The same also goes for careers. There are not enough advertisements and outreach from businesses within the area to let students know about possible career opportunities after they graduate. As we mentioned earlier, WCU could help educate freshmen as soon as they arrive about what there is to experience in the region.

Wages expectation-Another unrealistic expectation that arose from the student focus group was their perception of what businesses in the area can pay students while they're in school. When we asked the students what wage they would want to see at least to work on campus or within the region they responded with \$20/hr. This expectation could be due to certain students coming from another part of the state or country where this is a going wage for retail or the food industry, but this region cannot pay this high.

Driving times-When students come here, they do not understand the time it takes for them to drive to a town 15 miles away that it would take them the same time to drive 5 miles in a busy city. We observe that they let the distance of miles deter them from traveling to Franklin or Bryson City if they're in Cullowhee. It is important to get them to understand that this distance really isn't that far to explore another area.

Assumptions From Gaps in Expectations

Wages-We mentioned some of the assumptions that come from these gaps in expectations early, but it is important to reiterate those. Students who believe that they

should be paid \$20/hr while working and completing school then complain about the area and only go to the few companies that can pay that. This then puts pressure on small businesses that already cannot find employees and complaints about a fair wage, this only makes it harder for them.

“Nothing to do”-When students believe that there is nothing to do in the area due to the lack of marketing and/or knowledge, then they resort to online activities and just buy items from large corporations like Amazon. Or they will spend their weekends in Asheville when their dollars could be spent in this region. There is a huge negative economic impact when people are not educated on what there is to do in an area and encouraged to get out and explore.

Shopping-When students don't understand that driving thirty minutes to Franklin or Bryson City isn't that unrealistic, then they complain that they live in the middle of nowhere. This results in them shopping online more or in worse cases they are unhappy with the environment they are in and might transfer to a college in a city.

Untapped Potential of the area

WCU Cat Tran-While this focus group had many ideas, only a few were realistic and had immense potential for the region. One idea is utilizing the Cat Tran on campus for transportation to surrounding towns. The issue with this is that students tend to turn towards other forms of transportation when commuting around campus. With the lack of utilization shown by the Cat Trans, WCU does not see a need for this type of transportation. If students were aware that this was possible, would they be more willing to use the Cat Trans?

Marketing-The main issue discovered during this focus group was the lack of knowledge contained by students of what is offered in this region. Students leaned more towards word of mouth for activities and looked for jobs offered on campus. What could WCU do to help spread awareness of the jobs offered here that students are unaware of? How could we communicate about the activities, entertainment, and restaurant options that are here? Many things were mentioned for activities needed when we in fact already have those activities. Google searches and social media pages posted by businesses are not fulfilling the awareness needed. If there were some type of referral systems set up through campus, a blog or social network where upper-class students could recommend businesses that they have recently experienced to new coming students then this may be enough encouragement for students to explore the region as well.

Community Engagement Requirement-WCU has the resources to provide a program for the “college experience” or add the information to the orientation for students. WCU

could count the program towards degree points for freshman or transfer students or even be required to go to a few places for their 195 courses. This would help new students explore the region. Recruiting techniques will be required to expand the knowledge of what jobs are offered here. Through this focus group we found that many students were leaving due to the “lack of opportunities” when careers are here, students are just unaware.

Business Engagement-A few students in the focus group mentioned that they would like to see more entertainment options downtown. One mentioned that the courtyard is not being used as other towns use their courtyards for socializing, live music, business marketing, etc... Offering the courtyard to be used by the public for events or marketing purposes could provide students with more knowledge about the region and encourage them to go out within the region. The town could have one night a month were businesses come out and set up tables to market their company and be able to show what they offer. The topic of businesses closing too early within the town was also brought into the discussion. It seems as if the town shuts down around 9 PM. Not all businesses may benefit from staying open later, but there are a few businesses that could profit well from staying open slightly later than they are now.

Interesting/Striking Insights from the group

Transportation-Some of the interesting and striking insights that we as a group gained from the student focus group were some of the followings. Things such as the importance of transportation for students in the region. This means transporting students from the WCU campus to the surrounding areas such as Sylva and Dillsboro. This could be the use of the Cat Tran. This is for students that want to go to bars, and entertainment, and for the students that may not have vehicles on campus. This can allow the students that are so-called stuck on campus to explore the area more often.

Knowledge-Another insight that we found from the student focus group was the lack of knowledge that the students knew about some of the activities that are offered in the area. The marketing and communication for this region are very poor for the students and not as much to the tourists. The region is missing out on huge potential customers and revenue by not marketing to the students of WCU. Communicating to the students about what is occurring on a weekly basis by using billboards and pamphlets would be a huge for the region.

Workforce issues-The number of students that were in the focus group that was working a full-time job was also a big insight that we discovered. Some of the students' request about what they should have been getting paid for their work in the region was unrealistic, but we could not believe the number of students that would rather work on

campus for a lower wage than would travel for a higher wage. This was shocking to our group because we thought that the students would drive a little further for a few extra dollars an hour. The students also want to have jobs that were in person and not the remote jobs that were offered during the Covid-19 time.

Limited time-This also leads to another insight that we found was the amount of time that students were working in the region and not having time to go out and enjoy the region and hang out with their friends and family. Our group thought that most students were trying to work those part-time jobs in the region but that was the opposite of the information that we gained from our focus group.

Living Expectations -The final insight that we gained from our focus group was the expectation of the students when they were coming here to WCU. Our group felt like the students wanted there to be more city life near WCU and that is just not the case. With the topography of the region, it is difficult to bring that type of life into the area. The WCU campus is known for the beauty of the mountains, leaves, and the campus. It is tucked away into a little area of western North Carolina, and it is meant to leave a small homey feeling to the campus. In some sense, it felt as if the students did not truly know what they were getting into when coming to WCU.

Focus Group Key Takeaways - Realtors

What are most valued when living, working, and/or visiting the region?



The realtor focus group brought to light a wide variety of values expressed by those who want to live, work, or visit the Western North Carolina region. There was a common understanding between the realtors participating that “it depends on the clientele,” particularly regarding why they came to the region and what they plan to do there. With this in mind, the realtors elaborated on four specific values that they

believed to be the most commonly shared between their clients: price, proximity, atmosphere, and community.

Price-According to Realtor 2, “price is definitely a conversation that everybody has,” which makes sense as this industry is about selling homes. With further elaboration, it became clear that the participating realtors see this value most commonly in first time home buyers and locals seeking to rent or buy homes. As inflation in the housing market

continues to rise, the prices of homes are becoming unaffordable for first time homeowners. This in addition to the availability of housing and high rate of resale, price is becoming more and more of a priority for anyone looking to buy a home in the region. Tax rates also came up as a pricing question that all of the realtors seemed to get quite often. Realtor 4 explained that the Western North Carolina region has relatively low tax rates compared to surrounding cities and states, making the region very appealing for those who are coming from areas with high tax rates.

Proximity- During the discussion of proximity being a common value of those looking to enter the region, there were three main points. One of these points was how employees in the region want to live near where they work. Realtor 3 elaborated, “I just had someone [as a client] who works in administration at Harris Regional Hospital and to them, proximity was important.” A separate point was brought up by Realtor 1 about how there is a large portion of the population that is looking to retire in the region and many are looking for homes that are close to healthcare providers. Later on in the conversation, proximity was brought up again in the context of the region being centralized between many other popular locations. This makes Western North Carolina a perfect place to “meet in the middle” for family gatherings such as Christmas and Thanksgiving.

Atmosphere refers to the natural beauty of the region and how accessible this natural beauty is for those who are in the region. The realtors in the focus group started to list off common client requests such as a 9- ridge view, a fishing stream, and outdoor activities as examples of what atmosphere implies. The climate of the region was also mentioned while discussing atmosphere. Realtor 4 would go on to say, “Most of [the people moving to the region] are fleeing other places...People in Minnesota and the other states up north where they have harsh winters like the weather here.” The Covid-19 pandemic also played a large role in the amount of people that came to the region for a change of scenery. Realtor 2 said that many of their clients were fleeing larger cities after the pandemic due to feeling cramped.

Community- All of the participating realtors were in agreement that the sense of community in this region is something truly special. Realtor 2 stated “The energy in these mountains pump into your soul, and people look for that.” While many of the participants were local to the area, this was confirmed by those who were not local as well as many of the audience members observing the focus group. This “warm fuzzy” feeling as Realtor 2 calls it, was addressed by the realtors as more of a reason to stay in the region than a reason to come to the region.

What must change to improve the lived experience of key stakeholders?

While all of the realtors that participated in the focus group believe that this region has many wonder attributes, they made sure to address two main problems that affect their industry in the region. These issues are unreliable broadband and cellular service and the lack of affordable housing.

A lack of reliable internet and cellular service has been a recurring point of interest from part I of the report as well as all the other focus groups that were conducted. It was made very clear that this issue influences realtors and their clients as it was brought up early in the discussions. The context of this discussion was centered around the increase of remote workers wanting to enter the region. All of the realtors in the focus group stated that they have seen this increase in remote workers firsthand with Realtor 4 saying “Almost 80% of my buyers mention [internet] because they are planning on working from home.” The focus group agreed that this trend grew exponentially during and after the Covid-19 pandemic even within their own industry. Realtor 3 stated “I did a lot of facetimes with my clients and still do,” to which many of the other participants replied stating that they also do this and that it helps save the clients’ money and time as well as simplifies the due diligence requirements for realtors when selling a home. With this in mind, reliable internet and cellular service is critical. While there are efforts to improve the internet and cellular connection via satellite internet and 5G cellular services, the current quality of internet and cellular service is comparable to DSL according to the focus group. This presents a problem for those interested in entering the region to work from home, particularly for jobs that would require high upload speeds or the need for a VPN.

Affordable housing, like internet and cellular service, is also a recurring point of interest. This particular issue is something that this focus group was very familiar with as it is directly affecting the industry, they all work in. As previously mentioned in the section regarding the values of those coming to the region, inflation in the housing market is making homes unaffordable for people wanting to enter this region. One reason this is happening according to Realtor 2 is “[after] the pandemic, once they opened up the gates for the plains and everybody could get back on the roads, there was not one house available for rent that was not full. That is why a lot of investors got into the [short-term rental] business.” This oversaturation of short-term rental homes has essentially made long-term options harder to find and therefore more expensive. Furthermore, many of the short-term housing options were at one point long-term housing options that were repurposed, which decreased the amount of long-term housing options even more. The focus group expressed that this issue causes difficulties for not only first time homeowners, but also locals such as business owners and faculty members for large organizations such as schools and universities. Realtor 3 gives an example of how a large

portion of short-term housing is being rented to students who are paying per room. This makes rent prices rise to a point where it is too much for locals to afford. Realtor 3 stated, “It has been really hard to help people who are average workers, locals, find a house.” Realtor 4 responds by explaining that from an economic standpoint, it is less risky and more profitable to rent to 4 students short-term as opposed to a faculty member of WCU long-term.

What are some gaps in expectations and realities?

Lack of knowledge-As the realtors in the focus group gave their insight on their industry and how it is performing in the region, there were many instances where they described the processes of what the job of a realtor entails. They explained that a part of their job is to address the gaps between the expectations of their clients and reality. The most frequently mentioned gap in the focus group was based around the accessibility and features of mountain homes. Realtor 5 gave a great example of this gap when they said, “People that are moving in here from other places want to buy a mountain house and they have a vision of what they think they are going to get, then they get here, and they didn’t know you had to climb to get a view.” This point is brought up again later in the discussion by Realtor 3 who stated that many of their clients want a nice view from their mountain home but are not comfortable with having steep driveways. Similar concerns from clients included not wanting gravel roads, having to drive long distances to have a mountain view, and having to leave their property to do outdoor activities like fishing and hiking. When asked about the potential reasoning behind these gaps, the realtors all agreed that it was a lack of knowledge and understanding of the limitations that the topography puts on the region. Western North Carolina’s topography consists of winding roads, frequent fluctuations in altitude, and rocky, uneven terrain. However, there are some areas in the region that are less sloped, such as Macon County. In short, the features and accessibility of mountain homes are dependent upon where it is in terms of elevation and the terrain upon which the home was built.

What are some of the assumptions resulting in these gaps?

Drive times-As previously stated in the gaps between expectations and reality section, there is a lack of knowledge of the limitations that topography creates for the region in terms of housing and transportation. The main assumption that comes from this gap is that many people who are coming to the area think that most mountain houses have everything they are looking for in terms of the features that were mentioned earlier. Realtor 2 commented that “They have been on the internet, but they have no idea that these places [they see online] may be two hours apart.” This applies to many of the gaps such as not expecting to have to travel a long way from town to get a view of the mountains from their home or having to leave their property to do outdoor activities.

Vehicle needs-This brings up another assumption that Realtor 2 also mentioned, which was people thinking they would need a vehicle with 4 wheel drive to travel in the mountains. When people think of the mountains, many envision rough rugged conditions, particularly when going out to do outdoor activities like camping, hiking and fishing. Because of this, many people who want to live in the area may think that a vehicle with 4 wheel drive is necessary. According to Realtor 2, “It depends on where you end up. If you end up on one of those [rougher] roads and you want that view bad rough, then yes you should invest.” Realtor 2 elaborates by saying if you are only driving a couple miles a day on paved roads, a 4 wheel drive vehicle may not be necessary.

What is the regions untapped potential?

The focus group was very eager to express the potential opportunities that the region could capitalize on. There were two opportunities that came to the forefront of the conversation: the introduction and development of more reliable satellite internet services such as Starlink and Skyfi and the creation of affordable, long-term housing to combat the housing crisis.

Reliable internet access- When the realtors were asked about improvements, they noticed regarding issues that deter people from staying in the region, the first thing that was mentioned was the development and introduction of reliable satellite internet. Due to the topography of the region, landline internet is available but very expensive and difficult to install, maintain, and expand upon. Because of this, satellite internet is the only option for many people in the region. Even with satellite internet however, online connection is still not consistent or reliable. Realtor 2 confirmed this point by stating “Unless they have a direct line of sight to a satellite or some kind of tower, it is almost impossible [to connect to the internet] in some places.” In recent years, companies such as Starlink and SkyFi have been attempting to provide more reliable satellite internet to more rural regions such as Western North Carolina. Realtor 2 said, “With Elon Musk and his Starlink, the Southeast is a very [common] test spot for him,” and continues to explain how Starlink has thousands of satellites orbiting the earth allowing for constant satellite connection due to multiple connection points. Currently it is performing at the same rate as other satellite internet options, but the realtors expressed that since it is still in its testing phase Starlink internet could potentially improve the internet connection in the region.

SkyFi, a local satellite internet provider, was brought up later in the discussion by Realtor 3 who said “Travis Lewis (owner) has done a phenomenal job in my opinion, and SkyFi is not accessible everywhere but I think it has grown tremendously. I think they have done a good job of growing this area and they really are trying. Sense Covid, they have really made great strides to grow here.” Depending on the efficiency of these new

satellite internet options, this could lead to exponential benefits for the region, particularly for remote workers who are or are interested in living in the area.

Housing Inventory- Regarding the housing crisis, the focus group was very interested in developing affordable long-term housing. As previously mentioned, the region's housing market is focused more on short-term rental homes as opposed to long-term residencies. This is making long-term housing scarce and unaffordable for the first-time homeowner and local employees in the region. While the focus group understood that there were limitations due to topography and funding, they all agreed that long-term affordable housing is a top priority. Realtor 3 made the comment, "It would be very helpful if we had investors and builders be able to come in and build not your view houses, but neighborhoods, single family affordable housing. We don't have a lot of people doing stack houses anymore or building extra houses, it is mostly custom built houses." Another point that was brought up regarding the types of homes available were condominiums and town houses. The region has a large population of older people who may not be able to maintain their full-sized home. According to the realtors, these older people may want to sell their homes but have nowhere to go afterwards. The introduction of condominiums would be the perfect place for these people to live, allowing more long-term housing to open up. These condominiums and townhouses could also be a great place for people living by themselves or couples with no children.

What are the most interesting/striking insights gained from this analysis?

The information gained from this focus group provided us with some very interesting insights on the industry realtors work in and the region as a whole.

Vacant homes-One insight gained from this analysis referred to the homes in the region that were not in use. Of these houses that were not in use, there was an estimated 60% of them that had no representation on the housing market. Realtor 5 gave this example to explain why some of these houses are not being represented: "You may find [situations] where this was a parent's house and they passed away. They had 4 kids, 2 of them don't speak to the others. Some of them may be divorced and have no idea where the ex-wife is. You could never get everybody that needed to sign off on things on the same page." To summarize, the ability for many houses to go back on the market in situations like these are dependent on how fast the legal proceedings happen. Another point on this insight brought up by Realtor 4 was that many of these older houses do not meet certain requirements to be resold. Realtor 4 stated "I saw one of those [unlisted houses] yesterday and I checked on it, and it was because it didn't have a septic tank." Another reason for these houses being unlisted is situations where the house is a family estate, but the owner is in a nursing home. While there is nobody technically living in it, it cannot be sold if it is a life estate.

Topography-Another striking insight gained from this analysis is that many of the solution to the issues mentioned in the focus group would work if they were implemented but are hindered by the topography and rural nature of the region and a lack of government resource availability and funding. This was made clear when talking about the creation of affordable, long-term housing in the region. The focus group explained how it is difficult to find investors that are interested in building these simplified and affordable homes in the region. Realtor 2 said “It all comes down to money, you know. Especially with the building [costs] and all that going up, most builders are lucky to get their mark up, unless it’s a custom home, and that becomes a pain too because [clients] make all of these changes... You try to make sure that before you put stuff in the ground that it’s budgeted, it’s going to be done in a timely manner, and then it’s a matter of materials.” Realtor 2 continues to explain how material orders commonly arrive late, which irritate the client and costs money due to the delay. The focus group also talked about how the region is not built topographically to create the same types of housing complexes people see in larger cities like Raleigh or Greenville. Realtor 3 stated “We would be lucky to get 5 or 10 flat acres to put houses on.”

Focus Group Key Takeaways - Faculty Working on Campus but Living Outside the Region

What are most valued when living, working, and/or visiting the region?

Participants have access to and at least some knowledge of the things they value the most, such as what they like to do to relax and have fun.

Entertainment-Some of the things that these participants valued the most were what they could do in their free time, such as entertainment and visiting retail establishments. Participants that enjoyed going out during their free time stated that they have access to and have at least some knowledge of good places within their area that they like to go to, like local breweries, nature walks, and restaurants. It was noticed that the participants only had knowledge of things in their close area and believed that there isn’t much else to do in other areas.



Housing was another thing that participants valued, as every participant stated that they had difficulty finding an apartment, house, or rental that fit their needs. Multiple residents are in temporary housing until a better permanent residence becomes available. Despite

the difficulty finding housing, the participants all greatly enjoy the area in which they live, and actually hold a lot of value for their daily commute.

Job/Commute-Some participants have built their schedule with their commute to only come to campus two/three days a week and work remotely for other days, which gives them more time for hobbies and activities outside of work. Each participant also stated that having a fulfilling job in the region brings a lot of value to their daily life, as each has found their “dream job.”

What must change to improve the lived experience of key stakeholders, reasons, and impact?

Dining/Shopping-Bringing more awareness to the faculty as to what there is to do in the area. Each mentioned wanting more places to eat and things to do. It was mentioned that the faculty that once lived in Sylva felt that it was very isolating, “I felt like I was out in the middle of nowhere and even like to go to the grocery store. The Ingles in Sylva was really only about four miles or something from where I lived. It just felt like it might as well have been an hour away.” (Participant 2) This may be due to the inability to find entertainment, retail, and food establishments due to a lack of well-advertised localized marketing. During our secret shopping experience, we found many establishments in every area, but due to their commute patterns, the participants aren’t aware of these new places they could visit outside of their normal routine.

Breweries/Bars-Most participants in the focus group are frequent visitors of bars, breweries, and wineries in their local area. The most frequented places seemed to be Asheville, and Waynesville for these types of attractions. When asked about what one member liked to do in their area of Asheville they replied, “every time I can, I go downtown, and I would love to have tried every brewery there is because we have a lot of different breweries, and we like to go to every event that there is.” (Participant 3) These faculty members already have set routines and things they like to do outside of Region A which is why future faculty of WCU need to be educated on what there is to do in the area, so they do not feel the need to live farther away.

Connections-WCU needs to become a hub of information to educate faculty on what is available for them to do in the area. This can be done by having an “orientation” for new faculty and informational packets about what there is to do in the area (F&B attractions, entertainment opportunities, ECT).

Attracting faculty residents-Additionally, the region should focus on attracting more faculty to live closer to Western Carolina University. Having more faculty members living inside the region would result in a larger population of highly educated individuals that live, work, and engage with the community. This would also raise the average

income level and provide more service resources for the community. Additionally, this would bring in more of a demographic that increases the market for more year-round social events, and cultural activities, and could serve as a draw for larger businesses to locate in the area.

Community development-A potential way to enact this might be for WCU to recruit/partner with a commercial developer to build a town square community that caters to faculty in the area, as it already provides many student-related entertainment and social activities. This could be a long-term plan to build a community retail center with adult housing options, shopping, restaurants, grocers, and entertainment options. Also creating and provide a gathering place for afterhours, the existing cultural theatre and musical events that can be offered in the Fine and Performing Arts venue or Ramsey Center. The Skyland Drive development in Asheville is an example of how a community hub with housing can create a city like environment thus attracting faculty to live in the region closer to WCU.

Hiring-A striking insight found during the focus group was that every participant explicitly stated that they have a strong desire not to live in the Sylva area and that they were very comfortable and happy in their current residential area. Each stated that they were willing to drive up to an hour of commute every day rather than live in Sylva. A potential solution to this is that in the future, WCU must focus on recruiting more professors that are willing to live in the Sylva area and will enjoy the entertainment, food, and retail establishments that are available.

What are the gaps in expectations and realities?

Public transportation would be an incredibly difficult project to undertake here in Sylva and the general Region A, as the area does not currently have the tax revenue, government funding, or space to build a large transportation system. While the region could potentially gather the employees to fill the jobs, their paychecks as public servants would depend on tax revenue, which the area needs to make more of to sustain them. There were multiple ideas from all focus groups that try to help the overall quality of life in the region, however, some of them are not obtainable with the current topography and resources for the Western Carolina region. One of these ideas was the addition of public transportation in the Sylva area, including a train system running from Sylva/Western Carolina University to Asheville. A participant of the focus group said, "If you could run a high-speed rail line from the university to Sylva to Waynesville to Asheville to the airport, that'd be perfect. A person would take the train instead of the car, the bus instead of the car." (Participant 3) Public transportation would be an incredibly difficult project to undertake here in Sylva and in general Region A. The area does not currently have the tax revenue, government funding, or space to build a large transportation system. While

the area could potentially gather the employees to fill the jobs, their paychecks as public servants would depend on tax revenue, which the area does not make enough of to sustain them. Although more transportation could potentially be obtainable with current resources, such as running a train from Western Carolina University to Sylva on weekends, mass transportation throughout the region is not. It is also not beneficial for the area to create a public transportation center that runs from Sylva to Asheville as this would encourage locals and students to go spend money outside of the area thus hurting the local economy.

Retail development-Another gap in the expectations from participants is the idea of more outdoor seating for local businesses and the addition of more buildings for entertainment and retail establishments. It is possible for there to be some room for more buildings and outdoor seating for counties with flatter topography, such as Franklin, counties with steeper topography are extremely limited on developable land and likely cannot develop more than what is currently built. While this would be a nice addition to the region, it is not currently aligned with the region's obtainable goals. In the regions with difficult topography, they could really lean more towards rooftop seating, which is a concept that was mentioned by one of the participants. They were quoted saying, "I'm very excited because there is apparently a boutique hotel that has been proposed for downtown Gainesville. A four-story boutique hotel that kind of does rooftop bars, which I think would be kind of a fun little addition." (Participant 2) With companies already looking into building these types of outdoor seating it is possible that this could be the answer to the problem of building this type of seating in areas with difficult topography.

Temporary Housing-Another major gap for the region is the lack of available and affordable temporary housing. Every member of the faculty focus group mentioned a long and frustrating time trying to find a place to live, showing that even individuals with higher salaries than average struggle with finding housing in this region. One instance that happened to one of our participants is that they looked for housing over a course of a few months and "made offers on places that were really crappy because the prices were going up and what (they) could afford" (Participant 1). Despite this, the participant still could not an offer accepted due to not being willing to add the additional costs of fixing up these properties. They finally settled on a run-down property that they got fairly cheap and with all cash, knowing that the house would require a lot of work. However, "it took six months to find someone to do the work and another six months before they were free to do the work" (Participant 1). Although housing is currently a national crisis, this is something that both WCU and the region must try to help elevate this problem to further encourage more highly educated individuals to move into the area.

What are some of the assumptions resulting in these gaps?

Community Knowledge-Due to the fact that many participants are not aware of the decisions and information of why some ideas for the region are not obtainable, some participants assume that the region’s leaders simply are not putting in the effort to fix certain weak points of the area. Such as public transportation, many participants throughout the focus groups stated that they would want more transportation to be available; they might not be aware of how costly it would be to the region and that it would likely raise the taxes of year-round locals.

What is the region’s untapped potential?

Marketing-We believe that those who live in and visit the region need education on the many activities and resources that are in the region. This would include educating students, current faculty, and new faculty about the many different activities to do in this region that are not marketed and advertised as well as they should be and therefore go unknown to residents and visitors alike. There are also a number of resources like the small business centers for businesses in the area that are not utilized as much as they should be because businesses are not aware they exist. Even faculty are not aware of the communities that are in close proximity to their work. For instance, one participant said, “The road only goes from Sylva to Asheville” (Participant 1) This shows that the faculty aren't even aware of other areas that are anywhere from 15-45 min away from them.

Focus Group Key Takeaways- Residents living in the region who frequently host visiting individuals

What are most valued when living, working, and/or visiting the region?



Outdoor activities-The residents highly valued the outdoors, and it was one of the main things they enjoyed most about living in the region and sharing with their guests. They all took guests to participate in outdoor activities, specifically mentioning heavy levels of interest in “hiking” and outdoor experiences that are not available in the regions from which the guests live.

Moderate Climate-Region A has very moderate weather and many visitors to the area are “surprised...how green everything is” and that this area is rainforest but there are no real

“extreme swings in the weather”. Residents and visitors alike mentioned the care put into preserving the rivers and natural areas, with 60% of the comments regarding “What residents suggest as activities to their guests when visiting” relating to some form of outdoor recreational activity.

Taxes-The low property taxes are a huge positive for this area and the small, unique, non-chain restaurants and retailers are a focal point for visitors with many of the focus group participants relaying how much their guests enjoy “shopping downtown” and perusing the one-of-a-kind shops for in the region’s downtowns.

What must change to improve the lived experience of key stakeholders, reasons, and impact?

Resident Focused Businesses-One of the changes needed to improve the lived experience of key stakeholders in Region A is the need for more resources for residents. Currently, 50% of the counties in Region A lack a non-grocery large box store or department store, such as Belk or Target, where residents and long-term visitors may purchase household items such as furniture, cookware, and clothing items. Including Jackson County, which has only a Wal-Mart, 75% of counties in this region lack access to a department-type store. Resident 1 made a comment on this absence and said, “If I want a better pair of socks, I have to go to Wal-Mart. There aren’t actual department stores.” This same resident reflected on how aside from restaurants, downtown is not resident friendly, and does not offer anything that is of use to them, which received resounding agreement from the other focus group participants. A few of the residents briefly commented on the region’s downtowns’ focus being to appease tourists, while lacking usefulness to the residents.

Entertainment for Children-There is also limited entertainment options for people with small children. Resident 2 said when addressing this issue, “There are no cinemas, so you don’t have kid friendly stuff for a 13-year-old, so can do what they like.”

Broadband/Cell Service-Visitors are also surprised by the lack of high-speed internet, and how sporadic the cell service can be, even in the downtown areas and within the city limits where service can fluctuate from LTE to 1x in mere meters. Of the focus group members, 100% of participants agreed that cellular service improvements and better broadband access is severely lacking and is a noticeable issue for guests when they visit the region.

Temporary Housing-Another frequently mentioned concern is the lack of temporary housing accommodations for large groups and visitors, especially when there is an event occurring at the Western Carolina University campus. When students from other

universities and their families come to Western for games, there is not a full-service hotel in Cullowhee and there are very few in Sylva. Resident 1 said, “Over the years, we’ve heard [complaints about] this lack of restaurants and other services adjacent to campus, and a lack of a full-service hotel right here in the area.”

Dining Options/Hours-Additionally, behind poor internet access and cell service, 60% of participants said the lack of diversity in food choices and accommodating business hours was one of the most mentioned complaints from both residents and their guests.

Campus Lodging Accommodations-When it comes to people, specifically students who come for games, visiting the area there isn’t a full-service hotel in Cullowhee or Sylva. Resident 1 said, “Over the years, we’ve heard this lack of restaurants and other services adjacent to campus, and a lack of a full-service hotel right here in the area.”

Airport-The last improvement that could substantially increase the experience of stakeholders in the region is a more accessible means of reaching the area. The majority of the residents stated the difficulty of reaching Region A, citing the need to travel to the Atlanta airport (two hours from Macon County) or travelling all the way to Charlotte or Greenville, SC (both 2+ hours from Region A) in order to avoid the inconsistencies of the Asheville Regional Airport. One resident specifically noted the high level of delays or complete cancellation of flights when they have tried to receive guests into the Asheville Regional Airport.

What are some of the assumptions resulting in these gaps?

Workforce/hours of operation-There are a few gaps between expectations and realities, one being that visitors want more restaurant options and Sunday hours for retail/food places, but there is not the workforce to accommodate these hours. Visitors love the “unique” and “non-commercial” stores with the small-town vibe, but this comes with small town hours of operation.

Topography-High- speed internet and public transportation are severely lacking, but the topography of the region and a spread-out, sparse population makes it difficult to attract companies and contractors that would be able to install this type of infrastructure. Expansion of services and retail for residents is needed and wanted but in Jackson County specifically, the topography makes it very expensive or impossible to add these businesses because of the amount of flat land that would be needed.

What are some of the assumptions resulting in these gaps?

Downtown Knowledge-Many visitors to Region A and some of the residents as well, have the assumption they need to travel an hour away to have fun and enjoy the riches of

Western North Carolina. The residents, especially, naturally assume that the stores downtown won't have the products or services that will satisfy their needs based on their past experiences, causing them to travel to the next town that is 30-60 minutes away, to find what they are looking for. If residents are not frequenting these businesses based on their previous assumptions, they cannot communicate with the local vendors to convey their needs and what they would like to see more of from the current entrepreneurs downtown, and potential future entrepreneurs.

Similar Amenities-There is also the assumption that Region A will have similar amenities to where the visitors are coming from, which currently, this area cannot support. Visitors and new residents to the area desire chain retailers and chain restaurants such as Target, Texas Roadhouse, Olive Garden, and Costco, which are available in many larger metropolitan areas, but are not currently feasible in Region A. Bringing in large, chain store would directly oppose the small-town charm that draws so many to Western North Carolina.

Lack of Knowledge-One of the residents commented on the lack of activities for individuals with children, but this may be a lack of knowledge of what the region has to offer, or the need for more hyper-local activities in each of the area's counties. Cherokee, NC is centrally located in Region A and home to numerous child-friendly activities such as Santa's Land, Cherokee Cinemas, and river tubing and fishing (also available in Jackson and Swain Counties). The resident from Macon County pointed out the plethora of small, relatively unknown museums and aquariums, which many of the residents had no knowledge of.

What is the region's untapped potential?

Year-round Tourism holds great untapped potential. Region A is a temperate rain forest with good weather conducive to camping year-round, even in winter. One resident pointed out the how the moderate climate and how winter is "not a barrier for...outdoor activity" and how "winter is the best time to hike for a view," due to increased visibility from the lack of leaves on the trees. Creating activities or awareness of activities that both residents AND visitors can enjoy during the low season in winter. Examples are fishing, brewery tours, winter/Christmas festivals, a brochure or guide of all the little museums and hidden treasures such as the gem mines, the Bryson City aquarium, the Appalachian Women's Museum, historical buildings/sites.

Marketing-Many of the focus group participants highlighted the need for better means to communicate the hidden gems of the region. There are museums, mines, and lesser advertised day trips within Region A that visitors and residents alike have little to no knowledge of, such as Fontana Dam Museum in Graham County, the Swain County

Aquarium, and a small gem mine museum in downtown Franklin, NC. A coordinated effort between the counties to bring more awareness to these hidden attractions is long overdue.

Airport-Additionally, a regional airport in Macon County, which according to the Economic Development Panel group has a gentler topography and more flat spaces, could benefit the region immensely. Macon County is centrally located in the southern portion of Region A and would ease the burden for travelers and residents alike and increase accessibility to Western North Carolina by removing the need to drive one to three hours away to receive guests.

What are the most interesting/striking insights gained from this analysis?

Love For the Area-One of the most striking insights of the resident focus group analysis is the residents' love for the area. Every resident passionately praised the beauty of Region A, what an amazing gem it is to live in Western North Carolina, and how satisfied they were with their small town. They acknowledged the gaps that prevent more people from moving to the area and that are inconveniences to living in a small town, however; they also expressed that they do not mind those inconveniences because they are mostly satisfied with what is present. One resident specifically mentioned not wanting the region to become "like Gatlinburg or Pigeon Forge" but that minor improvements, such as a renovated grocery store or a few more dining and shopping options, would be welcomed so long as it did not completely alter the environment that makes this area so special.

SECRET SHOPPING FINDINGS

Fifteen individuals participated in the secret shopper experience: 11 undergraduate students, 1 graduate student, and 3 faculty. Collectively, participants visited 120 businesses distributed across Jackson, Swain, Macon and Graham counties with the majority located in Jackson County (see Figure 1). They include 48 Food & Beverage (F&B), 32 retail, 19 entertainment, and 5 lodging establishments, and roughly 66% of these businesses are in close proximity to

Secret Shopper Business Category	Associated Industries' NAICS
Entertainment	71 - Arts, Entertainment and Recreation in the US
Food & Beverage	72 - Accommodation and Food Services in the US 72211b - Single Location Full-Service Restaurants in the US 72221b - Coffee & Snack Shops in the US OD4302 - Craft Beer Production in US
Lodging	72111 - Hotels & Motels in the US 72119 - Bed & Breakfast & Hostel Accommodations in the US
Retail	44-45 - Retail Trade in the US

Table 1. CREATE Bridges Business Industries

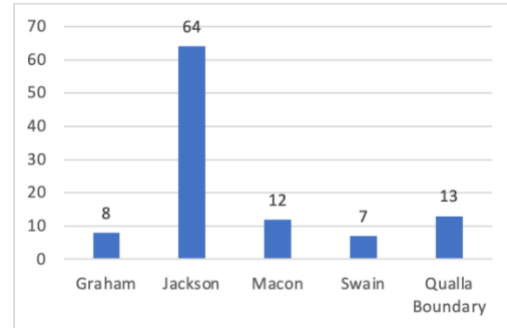


Figure 1. Geographic Distribution of All Businesses

downtown. In preparation, in-depth research of 8 industries (see Table 1) using the IBISWorld reports was performed to give the team a foundational knowledge of key

performance indicators and future outlook for each industry.

Overview

Based on conversations with staff or through direct observation, the secret shoppers determined that while these businesses attracted customers of all ages, the median age of their frequent visitors was around 30. Majority of the visits took place on Fridays (18%) and Sundays (19%). Fewest visits occurred on Thursdays (10%) and Sundays (10%), which may be due to the fact that most businesses are closed on Sundays (see Figure 2).

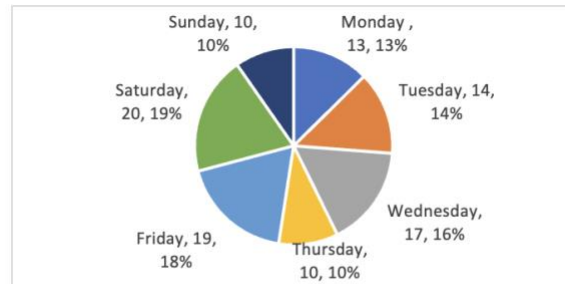


Figure 2. Days of Visits for All Businesses

The team used a scale of 1-5 from very unsatisfactory to very satisfactory to review our secret shopper experiences for business discovery, access, welcomingness, and overall experience. The team also used thematic analysis to breakdown the qualitative data to discover patterns of meaning.

Prior to the actual business visit, secret shoppers first researched the companies online, primarily through websites and available social media platforms. This discovery process helped the team

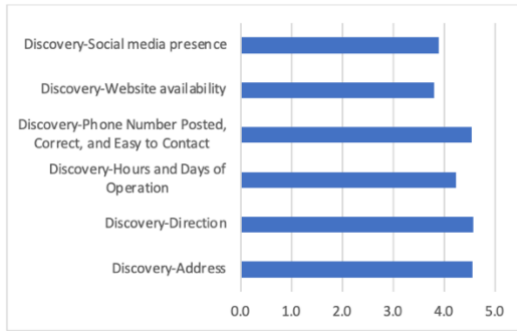


Figure 3. Discovery Results for All Businesses

Upon arrival at the businesses, secret shoppers were more than satisfied with the signage and ease of locating the business physical entrance. However, access to nearby parking was limited (see Figure 4), which could be partly because many of the businesses are in close proximity to downtown. Nonetheless, businesses' proximity to key markets and location in high foot traffic areas are key success factors for CREATE Bridges businesses (IBSWorld Industry Reports).

recognize that while everyone was at least satisfied with finding information about the business, website availability and design, and active social media presence are two areas with additional room for improvement (see Figure 3), a certainty that reflects a common key success factor across all industries: business ability to quickly adopt new technology (IBSWorld Industry Reports).

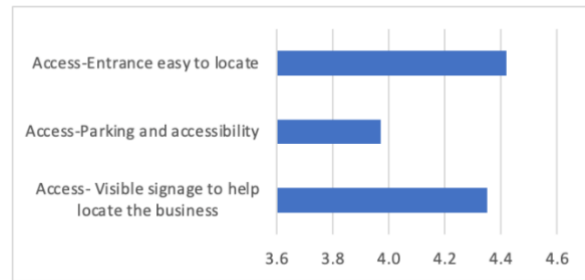


Figure 4. Access Results for All Businesses

An overall consensus among secret shoppers was that either the staff and business owner running the establishment had well-rounded knowledge of their menu/products/services. However, the staff lacked knowledge about the region to adequately recommend visitor additional places to visit or dine. It was also brought up

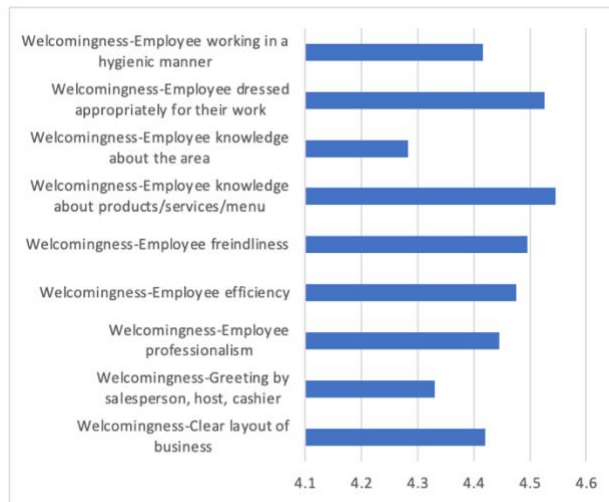


Figure 5. Welcomingness of All Businesses

that the first impression upon entering the establishment should be improved, this was reflected in the lack of proper greeting by the salesperson, host, or cashiers (see Figure 5).

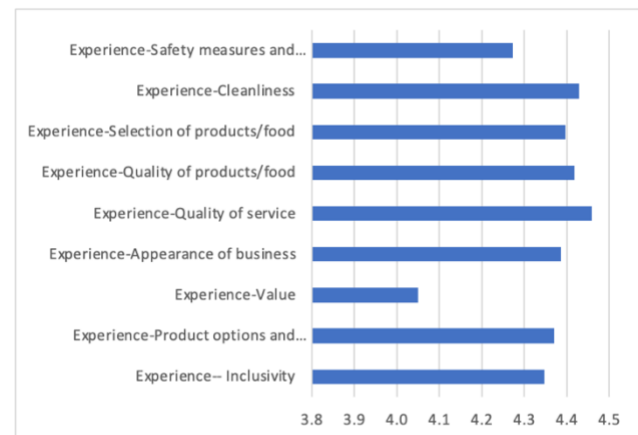


Figure 6. Overall Experience for All Businesses

As for overall experience, quality of service, cleanliness of the space, and quality of food/products/services were rated the highest across all secret shoppers, which helps strengthen brand reputation and building a loyal customer base (IBISWorld Industry Report); but a low rating on the perception of the value of food/product/services may deter repeat customer, especially for single location full-service restaurants as appropriate pricing policy is a key success factor for these businesses (IBIWorld Industry Report) (see Figure 6).

The following sections will breakdown secret shopping analysis by business category: F&B, Retail, Entertainment, and Lodging.

Food & Beverage Businesses

Secret shoppers visited 48 F&B businesses between September 20th and October 23rd across Swain, Jackson, Macon, and Graham counties as well as the Qualla Boundary. Days of visit were mostly balanced throughout the week, with Saturday being the most popular and Thursday the least (see Figure 7).

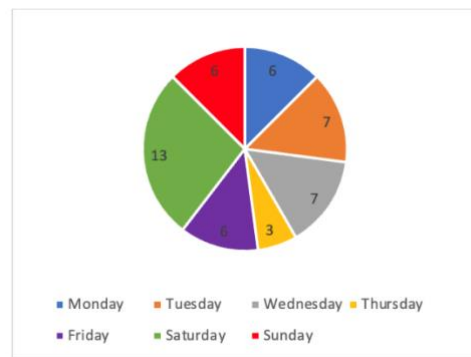


Figure 7. F&B Businesses Days of Visit

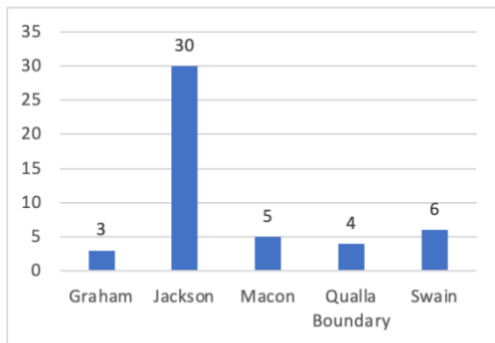


Figure 8. F&B Businesses Visited in Each County

It is important to note that 30 of these businesses were located in Jackson County specifically (see Figure 8), so findings might be skewed more towards Jackson County.

Evaluation of a sense of welcomingness of each visit provided insight into the business' professionalism, friendliness, knowledge, and efficiency. The average rating for all businesses' welcomingness was above 4.0, meaning that secret shoppers were satisfied with their experience. Employee knowledge of products and the menu received the highest score of 4.57 (see Figure 9).

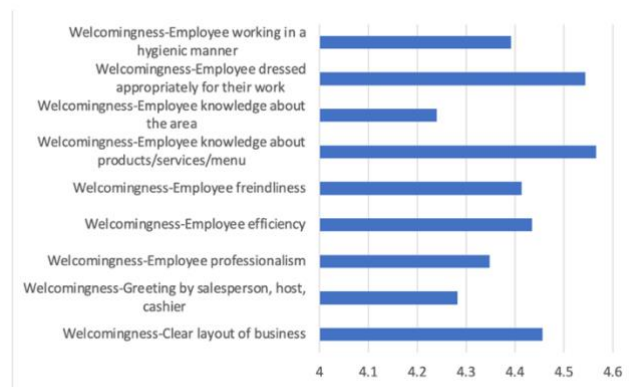


Figure 9. F&B Business Welcomingness

Another common theme was that every restaurant ranked high in customer service

and overall experience. Frequent phrases that were found throughout the data included friendliness, service, and quality. Those words also correlate with the strongest emerging theme of “friendly employees and staff members”. It seems that staff at almost all of the restaurants are well trained, friendly in nature, and make the experience of eating out pleasant. On the other hand, it is also interesting to note that while the staff are knowledgeable of their products/services, they lacked “knowledge of the area”, rating averaged 4.23. One way to improve this is by placing brochures in F&B businesses to suggest fun activities and other restaurants. A few F&B businesses could also invest in staff training to enhance professionalism and knowledge of both products/services and the region.



Figure 10. F&B Business Experience

Evaluation of the overall experience at the business provided insight into business’ product selection and quality, service quality, and overall value. All but one criterion averaged above a 4.0 as well. Food quality received the highest average score of 4.48 (see Figure 10).

While the F&B businesses in Southwestern NC region are doing well in many areas, three aspects stood out needing attention. Two were found in the team’s quantitative data analysis: parking accessibility and food value (price to quality ratio). The other was found in the team’s qualitative data: lack of Wi-Fi in the business.

Access to parking was the lowest scoring aspect of all criteria evaluated, at an average rating of 3.72 (see figure 11). This could be because 79% of F&B

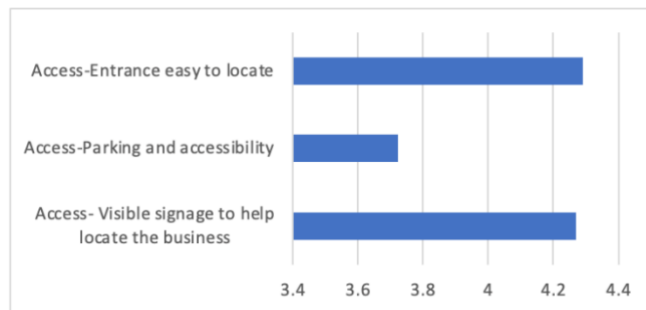


Figure 11. F&B Business Access

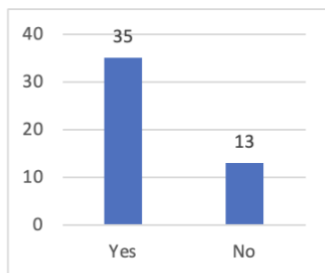


Figure 12. F&B Business Proximity to Downtown

businesses researched were located close to downtown (see Figure 12). Most downtown areas lacked the space needed for parking, leading to limited or no parking for those restaurants.

While secret shoppers’ overall experience was enjoyable, there was an emerging theme in the team’s qualitative analysis that food is “a bit pricey” for college students, rated at 3.96 in the

evaluation of overall experience (see Figure 10). If the F&B businesses' target market is to include college students, pricing policies or customized incentive programs should be reexamined.

Finally, limited/poor/no internet connection emerged as a recurring theme throughout our research, and emerged during the team's F&B business visits. According to the qualitative data analysis, where secret shoppers were to find if the business offered free Wi-Fi, around 50% did not. Some restaurants had Wi-Fi but did not provide it to their customers because that would "slow down their POS system". Others had no Wi-Fi in the business at all. As internet connectivity no matter where you are is becoming more important for customers, it may be imperative for F&B businesses to find a way to strengthen Wi-Fi availability and connectivity.

In conclusion, research showed that many F&B businesses in this region provide great hospitality with professional, informative, and friendly staff. To further enhance its marketability and potential, businesses should consider improvements such as modernizing/updating the structure of buildings, inner décor, technology and adding more parking and signage that is attractive to consumers. To stay in-tune with the current digitalization impact on businesses and customer needs, businesses should also consider correcting/changing/adding web content and making sure social media pages up to date with necessary information for tourists and locals.

There are a few things the group found to be either interesting or striking. The first thing was the way that some of the businesses marketed themselves. Most of the businesses had some type of social media presence that was a key for the marketing of the business. Some of the social media channels used include Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Businesses that do not have a substantial presence on social media could be caused by their lack of understanding of how social media works and how to run a platform successfully. Younger customers, like college students, enjoy looking at pictures of food or seeing specials run-on Instagram before trying a new F&B establishment. Posts like these can bring new guests in.

Another aspect our group found interesting is that some of the businesses did not have a website or the website needs a significant professional boost. The third aspect our group found interesting was how professional and innovative some of the businesses are. None of the businesses are the same. They all are unique in some way or another.

Finally, we found that even though the businesses had great food, great staff, and a fabulous building, they lacked marketing to allow more people to discover them.

Retail Businesses

Secret shoppers visited 31 retail businesses between September 20th and October 23rd, 2022. Days of visit were mostly balanced throughout the week with Wednesday and Friday being the most popular and Sunday the least, likely due to many of the shops being closed on Sundays (see Figure 13). The majority of these visits took place

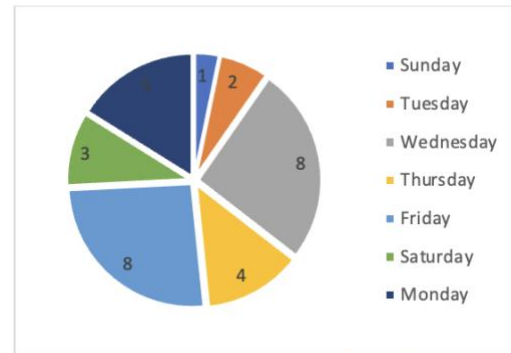


Figure 13. Retail Businesses Days of Visit

in Jackson County (see Figure 14).

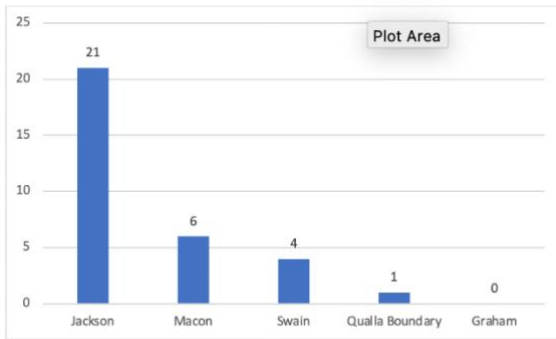


Figure 14. Retail Businesses Visited in Each County

The most successful interactions for the retail industry came from businesses that were easy to locate, access, and had friendly, interactive staff. A well-functioning website was not paramount to a positive interaction with the business but the correct information regarding location and hours

of operation were heavily contributing factors to a positive interaction. Poor parking options and poorly managed websites that were difficult to navigate, in addition to unhelpful or inattentive staff, appear to be the biggest contributing factors to a negative experience among retail businesses. Many of the participants mentioned the desire for souvenirs at businesses that lacked them. Nearly every business lacked an effective means of finding basic information online before visiting the physical location. Details such as address, directions, hours, and a description of the type of products/services offered were reviewed as being one of the paramount areas of improvement necessary for the business.

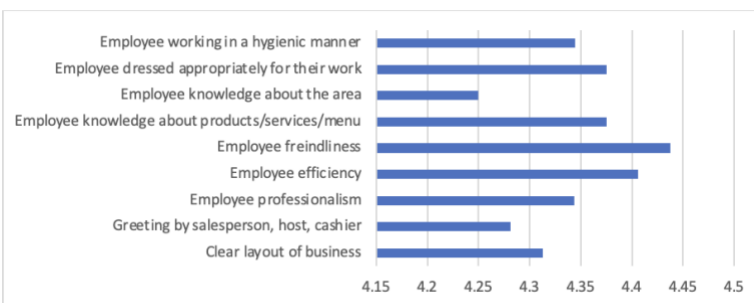


Figure 15. Retail Businesses Welcomingness

Many businesses in the region excelled in welcomingness and had employees that were very personable, with 60% of secret shopping participants commenting on the friendliness of the staff (See Figure 15). They were attentive to customers, helped them find products they

were looking for and offered assistance.

Many of the businesses in the downtown area are also marketable to almost every age range, with a median age of 30, as can be seen by the wide variety of products and services offered for the different age groups (See Figure 16). Most of the businesses are also doing very well by having a good social media presence and posting

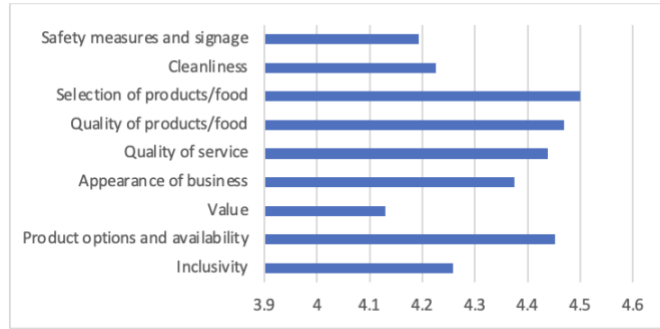


Figure 16. Retail Businesses Overall Experience

occasionally too frequently regarding their products, upcoming events, and updates to their days and hours (See Figure 17).

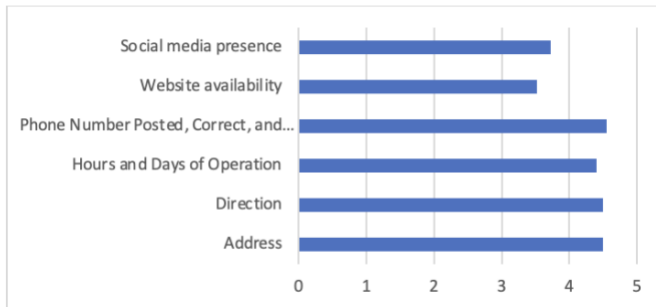


Figure 17. Retail Businesses Discovery

One thing that is not working for many businesses in the area is parking and accessibility. One secret shopping participants relayed having “to park at a Walgreens a block away and walk” and approximately 1/3 of all participants commented on the difficulty of finding

parking. Furthermore, according to the data collected from the secret shopper participants, 1/4 mentioned difficulty locating the business, with one even getting “lost” due to an incorrect address. Visitors may be deterred by the lack of convenient locations to park and enjoy the businesses downtown (see Figure 18).



Figure 18. Retail Businesses Access

Another critical aspect that seems to need to be addressed is that 1/4 of participants listed that the business is “hard to find” and mentioned the business having no website or a poor website. Over 20% of participants said signage was one of the top three things the businesses could improve upon (see Figure 18). Perhaps business owners need to update their website or obtain one and provide more detailed instructions so that customers might locate their business easier. Finally, there were many comments regarding how many businesses lacked a souvenir or memento with the business name that customers could purchase. This could provide marketing for the business and the region simultaneously, broadening the breadth of advertising for the area.

There is an expectation to have available parking downtown or within walking distance of downtown. The reality is that the downtowns in Region A are generally in small towns and have extremely limited parking. Some businesses will opt for more parking but in exchange, they may

not be located within walking distance of the downtowns. Additionally, some of the parking downtown is private, are off limits to visitors or guests run the risk of getting towed. The assumption that having a parking garage in a downtown area would solve the parking problem is not incorrect, but with the region's topography, building a garage would be very difficult. According to a report on Region A, "Approximately 66% of the district's land (both public and private) have slopes over 30%" and can make for difficult and problematic construction conditions (Region A 2020, 7).

Another gap identified is that over 50% of the participants commented on businesses having either no website or a poor website. The reality is that there is a lack of dependable, strong broadband connection in Region A, even within the downtowns and city limits of the area. This can result in difficulty being able to maintain a business website during business hours and make active updates to social media regarding the business. There is the assumption that with the year 2022 and the progress in technology/internet access that all areas of North Carolina have some form of internet connectivity. The unfortunate reality of this assumption is that Region A is still struggling to provide reliable broadband and some business owners may not have a strong enough internet connection to be able to maintain a website neither at their residence, nor at their place of business.

The region's untapped potential lies with social media and the marketing of business in the region through social media. The world sees the world through their phone, and they also see new places to visit while they are actively visiting and researching the area for activities and places. Jackson County, NC has an Instagram site that acts to highlight the beauty of the county via posts on their account and has links that take one to an electronic brochure of attractions within the area. If @discoverjacksonnc on Instagram were to post about a business but that business doesn't have an Instagram account or a website, how are visitors supposed to be able to search the business, see what they offer, or if the business is open. In today's world, many tourists look up a new business before visiting it to determine whether or not to stop by. There are many businesses without a website that could benefit from having one, or a well-built website that can provide the information customers need, such as an address, hours of operations, their vision, their goals, and what kind of things they offer. There are businesses in the area that have used this to their advantage and are doing very well, but there are some businesses who have a website but have either not updated it or their site is solely their social media page. In the short term a social media page is good, but in long-term having an archive online is safer, since social media is prone to hacking.

The most striking insights from this analysis have been how important reliable, accurate information accessible via an online platform is to patrons and the difference a business' staff can make to the overall satisfaction of the customer. With how connected society is to the internet and social media, a business must have a way to be accessed online and have accurate information directing customers to their location. When a quarter of visitors have difficulty

locating a business, there needs to be some form of improvement to the business' visibility, either in a physical form with more signage or electronic via greater online presence.

The other striking insight was how the demeanor and helpfulness of a business' employees heavily influenced the experience the secret shopper had at the business. This further solidifies the need to draw in a talented workforce that enjoys the area in which they live and their occupation, to retain workers that make shopping in Region A's downtowns such a great, positive experience.

Entertainment Businesses

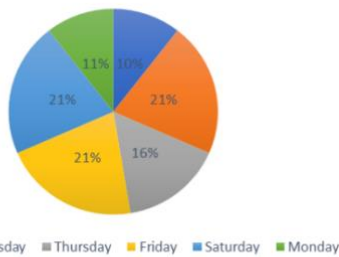


Figure 19. Entertainment Businesses Days of Visit

Secret shoppers visited 19 entertainment businesses between September 20th and October 23rd. Days of visit were mostly balanced throughout the week with Tuesday, Friday, and Saturday being the most popular and Sunday the least (see Figure 19). Most of the entertainment businesses visited are located in Jackson

County (see Figure 20).

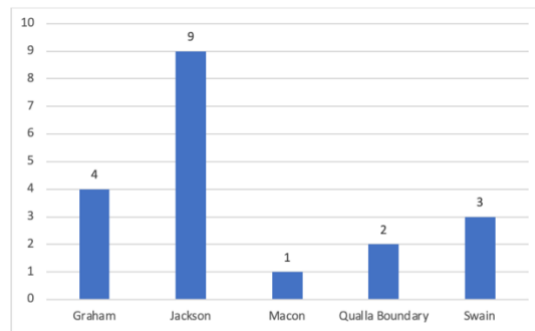


Figure 20. Entertainment Businesses Visited in Each County

Participants were able to easily find social media, websites, and other business information online. Business websites were kept up to date with contact information, hours of operation, and addresses (see Figure 21). A variety of social media platforms were used with the most popular being Facebook and

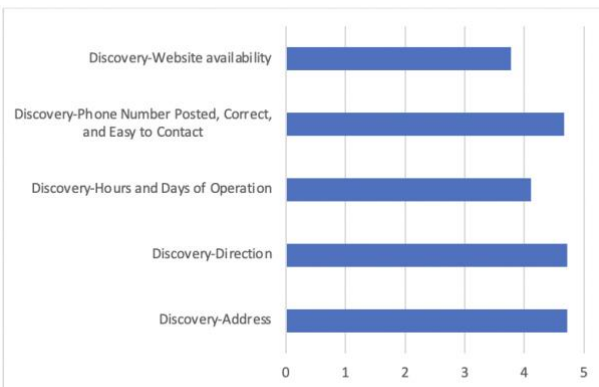


Figure 21. Entertainment Businesses Discovery

Instagram, which are used to inform and attract both locals and tourists.

Employees' knowledge of the product, professionalism, and friendliness were also found to be exceptional. The physical space was generally very clean with a pleasant appearance, doing very well in inclusivity, and had a great quality of service (see Figure 22).

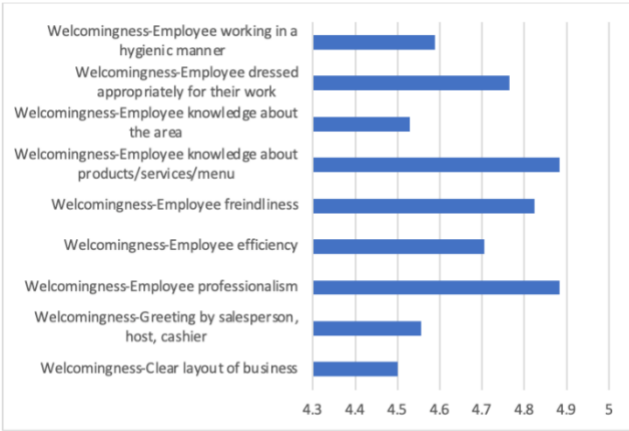


Figure 22. Entertainment Businesses Welcomingness

However, throughout the data, it was also shown that parking for these businesses was difficult, and many businesses were not easy to access due to limited nearby parking lots and handicapped parking spaces. Realistically, which is also acknowledged by other secret shopper analyses, it is very difficult to build new parking lots due to the steep topography of the region. This leads to difficulties for both locals and tourists who might be interested in visiting these businesses and

might require closer or more accessible parking spaces. Despite this, the entrances of the businesses generally were easy to locate and had visible signage from the road that made the business itself easy to find (see Figure 23).

A moderate weakness for the entertainment businesses in this region is the overall sense of welcomingness. Employee greeting upon customer arrival was frequently missed. Employees also did not have enough knowledge, or were unable to communicate their knowledge of the region in a positive way to promote other businesses and attractions (see Figure 22). Throughout the



Figure 23. Entertainment Businesses Access

data, it was noticed that if a secret shopper had the chance of speaking directly to the owner, they had extensive and detailed knowledge of the area, and were able to recommend several different businesses and attractions for several different customer preferences. This is currently an untapped potential, as this knowledge is not being passed to the majority of their employees, many of whom could not give many recommendations for the area or did not understand how to communicate the information in a way that reaches the customers. Whether the customer is a local college student, a local resident or a tourist, it can be off putting to hear from employees that “there isn’t a lot to do in the area.” However, it could be extremely beneficial to the business and the community if owners and managers established training on customer communication focusing on what to recommend in the area and how to communicate it properly. This not only helps draw these customers back into the region for more businesses, but also help the customers experience our region’s hospitality of friendliness, helpfulness, and knowledgeable people.

The entertainment sector in the region is doing well in hiring friendly and approachable employees who are very helpful and provide good customer service. This industry is also doing well in providing unique and creative products and experiences to the local community as well as

tourists. The businesses were very clean and well maintained which added to the atmosphere of the businesses themselves. These businesses also had plenty of signage along the highways and major roads so they were easy to find.

Another weakness of the region is businesses' difficulty in logistics: receiving and maintaining a well-stocked merchandise inventory. While supply chain issues are currently a global problem, Region A is experiencing extreme difficulty with product shortages due to the availability of shipment into the area.

Overall, there have been amazing reviews on the friendliness of the employees which was something that seems promising for the future of these businesses. The lack of knowledge about the area from employees was something that the team did not expect to be as significant as the data showed. This is very concerning as most tourists ask employees for suggestions about things to do in the area.

Lodging Businesses

Secret shoppers visited 5 lodging businesses between September 20th and October 23rd. Days of visit were mostly balanced throughout the week (see Figure 24). These businesses are in Jackson and Graham counties (see Figure 25) and 4 of the 5 businesses were located outside of downtown area, which means guests would need to drive in order to visit downtown.

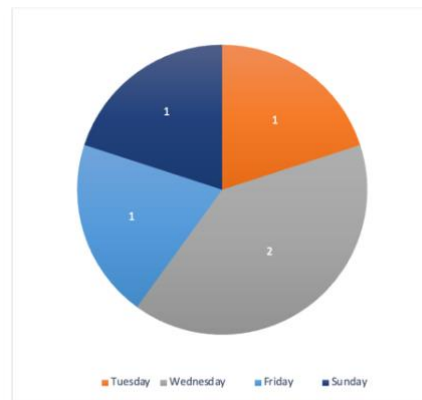


Figure 24. Lodging Businesses Days of Visits

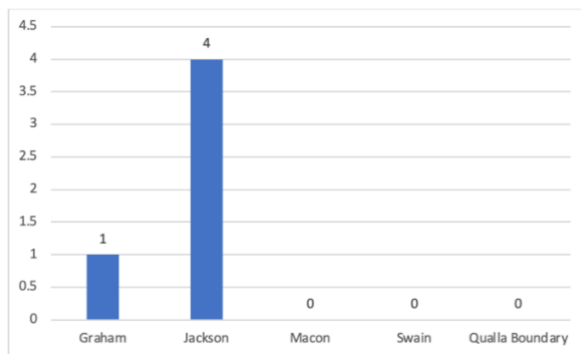


Figure 25. Lodging Businesses Visited in Each County

information and directions were easy to find. It was also recognized that all the accommodations are present on social media (see Figure 26).

The 5 accommodations were all rated above 4.0 on all discovery criteria. Upon visiting each business' website, business address, contact

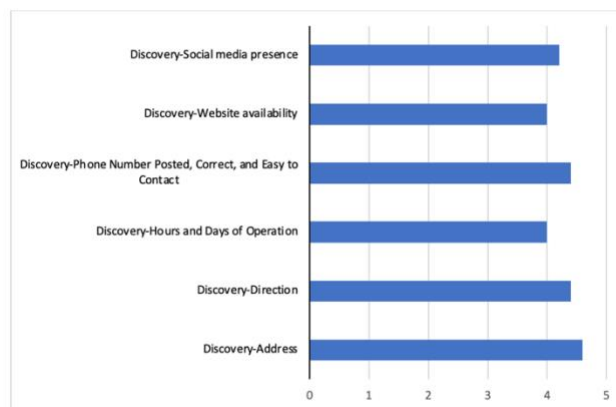


Figure 26. Lodging Businesses Discovery

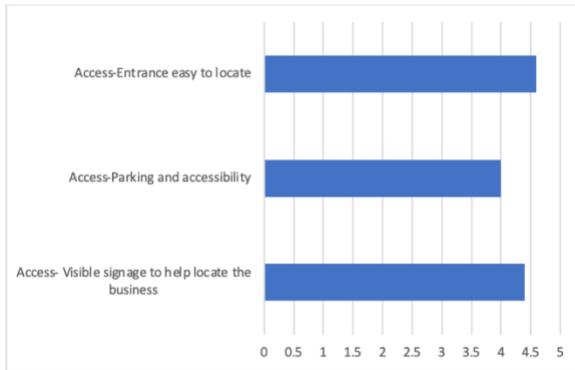


Figure 27. Lodging Businesses Access

All businesses scored relatively high on accessibility, especially on the ease of locating the front entrance and appropriate signage. Although compared to other CREATE Bridges businesses, especially those located downtown, the average rating for parking was above 4.0, this remained the lowest rating for business access comparatively (see Figure 27).

The accommodation businesses in the region are doing well in providing a welcoming

atmosphere for their guests, especially in the friendly and professional staff and cleanliness of the facility. Nonetheless, all accommodations could continue to improve on staff knowledge of products/services as well as knowledge of the region to be able to help guests find fun places to visit and recommendations for dining options to improve guest experience (see Figure 28).

Overall, the lodging businesses are doing well in providing a positive experience for their guests. However, a concern is their accessibility to town and other attractions in the area without a vehicle, especially since public transportation is not easily available. As indicated above, out of the

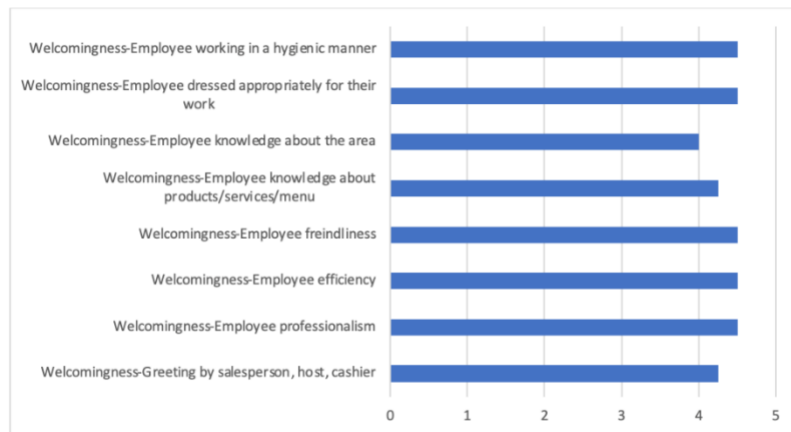


Figure 28. Lodging Businesses Welcomingness

five lodging businesses, only 1 was in town or within walking distance to downtown. Many tourists assume that all destination areas have transportation services like where they are from. Especially with the introduction of services like Uber and Lyft, it is a common misconception that these services are available in abundance everywhere you go. Therefore, including a form of public transportation or shuttle service could potentially alleviate this issue, a major untapped potential for the region. Another concern is Internet dependability or availability for some locations especially for guests who may need to work remotely while on vacation, but the internet is not reliable enough. Online booking or presence is also a concern for some locations. Updated pictures and information on the website or social media channels will help guests see and learn more about the place before booking. The ability to quickly adopt technology is a key success factor for lodging businesses (IBISWorld Industry Report). Finally, added signage on main roads would also be beneficial advertisement for the lodging businesses.

One of the most important insights gained during this analysis was that people who visit this region have their expectations beat by the welcomingness and friendliness of the people from the region, but at the same time, they experience challenges and frustration with limited public infrastructure present in the region, such as internet access and public transportations.

Part III: RESEARCH ANALYSIS

Common Themes: Economic Development Plans vs. Focus Group/Secret Shopper Findings

It was stated in the regional report that WCU is an opportunity and “It is integrally connected to the region as an educational and economic resource while bringing cultural opportunities to Region A through theater, music, and events which are open to the public” (Region A, 2020, p. 9) With this said, throughout the project, many of the participants that are connected with WCU, specifically the students, had wished that they were more aware of what is around in the area. They also held a desire to stay if they could. Creating the opportunity for the university to get students and faculty to go out into the region while at WCU would also be a great opportunity for businesses to find a skilled workforce through connections in the university.

The land set aside for public parking is not displayed on a website or a town directory for any of the counties in the Southwestern North Carolina region. Due to that, many will find frustration in finding parking and will avoid going to the downtown areas of small towns. As stated in the regional economic development report, we face hardship by trying to develop on land when 66% of that land slope is on the 30% limit for any major construction (Southwestern NC Economic Development District, 2020, p. 4). Although the thought of building a parking garage or expanding parking areas is desirable, it is difficult to implement due to the excess slopes on available land.

When comparing data found from micro perspectives and IBIS industry reports for Entertainment, Retail, and Food & Beverage, one major similarity can be found. Social media presence was found to be very weak in the region, although the ability to adapt to new technology, such as social media, is a key success factor in entertainment (Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation Industry Analysis, 2022, p. 2). Additionally, engagement with customers through social media is a trend in single-location full-service restaurants (Food & Beverage Industry Analysis, 2022, p. 3). This matches secret shopper data that social media presence is weak in the region (Secret Shopper Complete Analysis, 2022) and will need to improve for businesses to be more successful.

Gaps: Economic Development Plans vs. Focus Group/Secret Shopper Findings

While the student team did find commonalities between problems reported in our economic development section (Part 1) and our microdata collection (Part 2), there were some gaps. These include problems we found from our data collection that were not covered in ED reports for

Southwestern North Carolina and also problems that were brought up in the ED reports that we found not to be occurring in the region from our analysis. Public transportation is considered an issue in the Southwestern North Carolina ED report (Southwestern NC Economic Development District, 2020, p. 12), but we found that increasing funding and infrastructure would not lead to ED improvement. Even with communication networks that have been created, such as Sylva Shopping Support (CREATE Bridges Interview, 2022), businesses in the region are still hurting from a lack of good advertising. Finally, the ED reports for both the state and the region wanted to focus on skilled workforce training (Southwestern NC Economic Development District, 2020, p. 21; see also North Carolina Department of Commerce, 2021, p. 7)¹, but our secret shopper data concluded that employees in the CREATE area were already quite efficient in their work (Secret Shopper Complete Analysis, 2022).

While 57.66% of residents in the Southwestern North Carolina region claimed that public transportation was an issue (Southwestern NC Economic Development District, 2020, p. 12), our data on lived experiences suggests that while it is an issue, it has not hindered economic progress. In the student focus group, member 1 said he would “drive up to 30 minutes away” (Student Focus Group, 2022) when offered a Barcade in the region. Every member of the focus group agreed with his sentiments. In the commuting professor focus group, members agreed that they enjoyed their commute.

Public transportation may be considered an issue with tourists and residents, but we believe investing resources in this area will not show a significant increase in development in the area. People are still willing to drive to where they want or need to go. It is also unlikely to develop an efficient public transportation system due to the region’s topography and distance between towns. Instead, development could focus on informing residents, new residents, and tourists how it is not feasible and ways they can best travel through the region.

A major disconnect between macro and micro research was business marketing. ED reports did not list marketing as a priority, but our data collection shows a need. For instance, in the secret shopper data collection, website availability and social media presence averaged below 4.0 for all businesses. These were some of the lowest scores across all areas of the collection. On one occasion, when secret shoppers visited 828 Escape, three of the five people who attended did not know the business existed. Most focus group members said they traveled to Asheville for activities but did not know of the activities available in the Southwestern North Carolina region.

There are plenty of businesses in the region’s retail, F&B, entertainment, and lodging sectors. However, because many residents (such as students) and tourists have not been made aware of their existence, these businesses are not operating to their full economic potential. It is

¹ North Carolina Department of Commerce. State of NC Economic Overview, April 2021

imperative that marketing becomes a focal point in the ED of the region to keep people and their money within.

Both the ED report for NC and the region discussed an improvement and increase in the skilled workforce. However, in the secret shopping data categories of experience and welcomingness (which measured professionalism, efficiency, and quality of service), businesses average over a 4.0. This means secret shoppers were satisfied by the work of employees. This gap is further exposed by analysis of industry reports for the CREATE industries, where key success factors state the retaining of a skilled workforce.

Currently, 65% of all employment gains in the Southwestern North Carolina region have come from the Arts, Entertainment, Recreation, Accommodation, and Food Services sectors, the sectors of businesses we visited for secret shopper data collection (Southwestern NC Economic Development District, 2017). If ED is to be focused on cultivating and improving the hospitality and tourism of the region, there is no need to focus resources on improving the workforce. However, if the region wants to diversify its industry share, then luring in a skilled workforce for technical fields will need to happen. The possibility of using student graduates of WCU to expand the skilled workforce will be discussed later in this report.

Part IV: PROPOSED RECOMMENDATIONS

After synthesizing both the primary and secondary research collected in the previous sections, and pulling themes from the data collected, the student research team was tasked with identifying three immediate priorities, two short-term priorities and one long-term priority. In this section each of these priorities and the recommended implementation are described in detail.

Immediate Priorities and Implementation

The three top priorities identified that might institute immediate impact and be actionable within less than a year include:

- **Enhancing Communication Between Western Carolina University and the Local Business Community**
- **Increasing the Knowledge and Participation of Local Residents to Help Address Broadband Issues**
- **Improving the Websites and Social Media Presence of Local Businesses**

It is expected that by addressing these three areas, the region will begin to see economic development improvements where businesses, tourists and residents will benefit from the increased cash flow to the local economy, improved broadband access and updated local business information online. This will increase the quality of living or visiting within this region of North Carolina.

Immediate Priority #1: Enhancing Marketing Communication Between Western Carolina University and the Local Business Community

The first priority is to address the need to facilitate better marketing communication about the region to Western Carolina University (WCU) and its students/staff members. When assessing the region's potential areas of improvement, it was discovered that there needs to be a better means of informing the students and staff members of WCU about the wealth of activities, shopping, and dining available in Region A.

Immediate Priority #1 Reasoning:

Increasing the overall market reach through better communication to a revolving number of individuals temporarily in the region. Data collected from the student and

faculty focus groups indicate that many participants believe that there is “nothing to do” in the immediate local area so based on this data, there is a large, untapped market that simply lacks information about the rich retail, dining, and entertainment opportunities available in the four county region without the need to travel to a larger city such as Asheville, NC. The size of this market is around 14,000 individuals since Western Carolina University employs nearly 3,000 individuals and instructs approximately 11,000 students. ([Western Carolina University - Fast Facts \(wcu.edu\)](https://www.wcu.edu/fast-facts)) Only 4,500 of these students are residential, but regional information distributed to all students might entice more of the distance students and families to visit campus and the surrounding area.

Matches Existing Economic Development Goals—Creating marketing campaigns for the regional businesses is already an established goal in the current ED plans. Both Jackson County and Graham County identified the need to “create a marketing campaign... to support existing business and attract new business” (*Jackson County Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy*, pg 19)² and the Region A economic development strategy report also explicitly states the need to “develop a marketing effort” and “marketing strategies” as a short-term priority. There is also a gap in knowledge about the foodie culture in Region A and the outdoor adventure havens west of Waynesville and Asheville, such as Fontana Lake. The Region A economic development report repeatedly addresses the need for more marketing opportunities in this area, including the dining and shopping that appeal to visitors and the quality of life and work opportunities available that could draw in more talent and improve the lives of the current residents. Many new residents, students, and tourists have the expectation that Region A will have similar shopping, dining, and experience amenities to Asheville, without realizing that the beginning of the region, Jackson County, is over an hour away from the Asheville metropolitan area. This portion of Western North Carolina is less metropolitan in comparison to Asheville, but it is the rural charm of Region A that draws visitors and newcomers to the area. They desire the quiet, serene mountain landscape with the small-town allure but expect big-city retailers with services and hours to match. However, the reality is that to accommodate these expectations, the entire small-town dynamic that visitors enjoy and cherish so much would have to change entirely.

Market expressed demand for outdoor activities, dining, and entertainment. The demand for CREATE business products and services was made evident by the numerous comments from both the Faculty and Student Focus Group participants that identified these activities as what they enjoyed the most from living in western NC. Unfortunately, they indicated they currently sought these activities and entertainment options outside of Region A. (Region A 2020, 20). In addition, during the secret shopper experience students were enlisted to visit different locations and engaged in shopping in the region’s

² Jackson County Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy. (2022, September 6th)

local businesses. As a result, 100% of the students that participated felt a stronger connection with the local community and expressed many unexpected positive experiences. They expressed their belief that many students are missing out on a great opportunity while in college to experience all the region has to offer because they just don't know where to go.

Immediate Priority #1 Recommended Actions: There is evidently a gap between the market demand and the awareness of local opportunities resulting in missed potential to capitalize on increased commerce and income. By creating a partnership between WCU, the local businesses, and the economic development agencies, a coordinated effort to reach this untapped market could be planned. WCU could help bridge the gap by distributing approved marketing information to students and faculty on an on-going basis. The university would become a catalyst to encourage the support of local attractions, restaurants, and shopping available within the region. Following are three recommended actions.

Action 1: Reinstating, Updating, and Creating a WCU Bucket list

- a) **Reinstating WCU's Bucket List-** One action that would entice both the students and faculty to explore the local area is by updating and reinstating the "WCU Bucket List" for new incoming students, staff, and faculty. This revised bucket list should include various local activities including restaurants, retail shops, and entertainment locations that would encourage students and employees to get off campus and explore what the region has to offer.
- b) **Updating the Bucket List for Students-** WCU previously had a Bucket List (pre-Covid 19) that was given to new students and employees but there was no incentive to accomplish any of the items. Upon review, it was found that out of 100 places on this Bucket List, only 30% of the locations were off WCU's campus therefore, to spread awareness of what there is to do in the region, the number of off-campus locations needs to increase drastically. This is necessary to create the off-campus experience and knowledge of the area desired. The reinstatement is crucial because currently no bucket list or plan for a bucket list was found for the 2022 academic year.
- c) **Creating a Bucket List for employees.** A new bucket list specifically created for WCU employees could be crafted to include more child friendly and family oriented activities.

Proposed Resources needed: There are several WCU departments that would need to be enlisted for the resources needed to implement getting the bucket list

running again. They are:

- a) **Economic Development office-** Rich Price as part of the economic development office at WCU might be able to lead the collaboration to bridge the communication and coordination between regional ED agencies, local businesses and WCU departments.
- b) **Residential Living-** Laura Allison, the residential living Director of Events and BaShaun Smith, the Dean of Students. The residential living office will be a crucial player in this solution, having access to all students that live on campus, especially those that are new and looking forward to exploring college life in a new place.
- c) **Student Orientation Department** would be necessary to create advertising and marketing for the Bucket List so that there is more awareness about it amongst WCU students and faculty.
- d) **Human Resource Department-** to distribute the bucket list at new employee orientations.

Expected Outcomes: The anticipated measurable impact that the Bucket List could have on the region is incredible if put in the right hands and advertised correctly to a currently large untapped market already residing within the region. With the Bucket List being provided to 11,000 students and over 3,000 employees, not to mention the extended families of the students who visit frequently, the potential for boosting economic growth and increasing the financial support of the local businesses is promising. Another potential result related to this action includes a more extensive awareness of businesses in the region that could improve the retention of talented students and faculty at Western Carolina University.

Action 2: Increasing social media utilization based on the bucket list accomplishment

With the new bucket list in hand, the next challenge will be to share it and make it known around WCU. The solution for this would be to utilize social media by creating a profile for the bucket list where students would be able to share pictures and experiences at the businesses that they have visited. To gamify the sharing process, signs for pictures would be placed in the businesses, and hashtags created to show which places the students have visited so far.

Proposed Resources needed: This system could be created by the marketing and entrepreneur teams at WCU or even by marketing students in an internship program with the school.

Expected Outcomes: This social media sharing process is excellent for being able to track individual participant engagement within the bucket list and is also a great method of measuring how many people are engaging in completing the bucket list and tracking the growth in bucket list participation year after year. The businesses will also benefit from the added social media presence related to their business.

Action 3: Create a word of mouth network plan for students.

While the bucket list may be an effective way to get businesses and WCU engaged in online, social media platforms, in some cases, having someone in a position of leadership that can vouch or spread the word about places to go and things to do in the local area is even better.

Proposed resources needed - Residential Assistance program - There is not a person on campus that has more person-to-person interaction with incoming freshmen than the RA's. Due to the heavy student to student interaction RA's experience daily, adding training about these off-campus activities into the RA training schedule would leverage individuals that are a direct source of information about the abundance of activities and entertainment in the local area.

Expected Outcomes: With the residential assistants being able to spread information about the local businesses and places to explore, more first-year students will feel more comfortable leaving the campus environment to explore.

The anticipated measurable impact that the Bucket List could have on the region is incredible if put in the right hands and advertised correctly. With the Bucket List being provided to 11,000 students and 3,000 employees, not to mention the extended families of the students who visit frequently, the potential for economic growth is promising. Not only would the local businesses benefit from the economic growth, but an awareness of businesses in the region could improve workforce retention of the talented students and faculty of Western Carolina University.

Immediate Priority #2: Increasing the Knowledge and Participation of the Local Residents to Help Address Broadband Issues

Reliable internet access in this area is such an issue that some businesses experience interrupted business operations when they cannot process payments over the internet and missed revenues due to the broadband issue. To address this issue, a paper petition that could relay to the residents of Region A the need to voice how lacking broadband services are in this area would help those that do have internet or have limited internet access.

Immediate Priority #2 Reasoning:

Residents, Faculty and Students- Lack of reliable broadband is a common theme in every economic development plan from the state to the county and was also the number one complaint from participants in all four focus groups when asked about where they thought the region could use improvement. If they have Wi-fi, some experienced slow upload speeds that hinders remote working from home. Cellular connection was also a common complaint and seems to be a major for issue with students, faculty, and residents commenting on their negative experience with dropped calls or no service.

Realty and Remote Workers-The realtors' focus group mentioned the potential implementation of fiber optics in the region but also said that this was years away from being completed. They also mentioned that due to excessive broadband issues, many potential residents and businesses that work remotely may be deterred from living in the region. During the focus groups interviews, some of the faculty mentioned being willing to drive 30 minutes or more to work, just to ensure their access to reliable broadband and cellular services at home would be sufficient enough for telework.

Restaurant and Lodging-It was observed that numerous restaurants and some lodging facilities in the region cannot offer wi-fi to customers due to unreliable connections and the impact customer use may have on the business' POS upload speeds.

Retail-One of the economic development leaders in the region mentioned during an interview that the broadband issue is so rampant that "some businesses have to close or put up a 'CASH ONLY' sign" when the internet access is poor or absent completely, resulting in hundreds to thousands of dollars in missed revenues.

Possible Root Cause of Other Challenges: Many of the commonalities listed above are the result of gaps in communication, knowledge, and expectations from residents, students, and visitors. Communication of opportunities for residents and WCU patrons desperately needs improvement, but to a certain extent, this ties into the need for better broadband access in Region A. Unbeknownst to many students and visitors, Region A

consists of over 70% public land, heavily limiting the areas available to install better broadband infrastructure (*Region A 2020*, 4). Public lands are those that are state or federally owned and do not allow for private development, such as Forest Service lands, state parks, and game lands. Communication could be improved by greater access to reliable internet for all, and there exists a need to relay to residents how important their voice is in petitioning for this improved infrastructure.

Immediate Priority #2 Recommended Actions:

Action 1: Petition- An immediate solution to address the broadband needs is to form a petition for residents to fill out via ncbroadband.gov. This will allow residents to voice their complaints about broadband access and reliability as well as test broadband capabilities and relay that information to the N.C. Department of Information Technology - Division of Broadband and Digital Equity. This will shine light and bring awareness of the broadband needs for the Region to the state government in order to hopefully bring about change. The petition will be a paper survey mailed to all residents in the Region with a link to ncbroadband.gov and the optional telephone contact number for residents that do not have internet access so that they might evaluate their connection speed and upload feedback to the NCDIT Division of Broadband and Digital Equity branch. This will allow for more resident awareness of their opportunities to address their broadband issues without having to possess a form of broadband connection. Feedback from the survey will also be provided to the NCDIT with the hopes of encouraging broadband improvement in the region.

Action 2: Identify the broadband needs- The current measurable status to glean the broadband need of the region is through ncbroadband.gov. While effective and easy to access, when interviewing an economic development leader in Western North Carolina, the research team learned how few people knew of this broadband test for residents to show the state where improvements are needed. A paper mailer could help fill in the gaps for individuals that still do not currently have the internet to access ncbroadband.gov. There is a number available to call, however; the number is found online via the state's website.

Proposed resources needed

a) Database- There is not currently a database to count and track paper petition signatures but with the help of the individual county's commissioners, the region could petition Raleigh to send an agent out westward to help develop a strategy to measure broadband needs in Region A. Regional economic leaders could also help pool together resources to develop the volunteer petition team that would be out gathering and processing signatures. There would need to be a leader for the petition team that has

experience with data processing and input to log signatures efficiently and accurately for the petition.

b) Volunteers- A team of volunteers that would work to be available at public gatherings such as local festivals and at other locations of high resident traffic would be imperative to getting knowledge of the petition out to the community. A paper mailer for mail in signatures would further extend the reach of awareness and help further display the need for improved broadband services within the region. A system of accountability would have to be developed to ensure there were no double counts of signatures, to minimize fraud, and to count and sort the data easily and efficiently. Another large pool of volunteers would be necessary to gather the number of signatures that would be needed to send to NCDIT. There would also be the financial need of stationery and stamps for mailers, but the human resource again would be individuals to prepare and send out the mailers. There would need to be a location available to prepare the mailers and count them when they are received back; however, the benefits to the region could be immense

Expected Outcomes:

Residents will become more aware that there is a way to express the need for better broadband in Region A, which will result in an increase in signatures, demonstrating to the state of North Carolina the extent of poor internet access in the region and the level of support from residents for government officials to work toward a solution.

Immediate Priority #3: Improving the Websites and Social Media Presence of Local Businesses

The third area of improvement found during our research, after conducting the CREATE BRIDGES secret shopping exercise, was that social media and website presence are two underdeveloped potentials for improvement within the region. In many cases, businesses either do not have an online presence at all, or their presence is underutilized by not having profiles on all major marketing sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and TripAdvisor.

Immediate Priority #3 Reasoning:

Technology dependent market- In a world where digital presence is the first thing to be checked by potential customers looking for businesses, not being able to be found in online searches may mean the difference between the business succeeding or failing. It is extremely necessary for businesses nowadays to have a website and all main social media profiles to give information and directions to customers. On the one hand, it is understandable that many of the small businesses do not have a strong online presence in a region due to the widespread issues being faced by limited broadband accessibility.

With the poor connections and cellular signal in the region, it is much harder for business owners and employees to keep websites and social media profiles updated. With that in mind, it is essential for all of these situations to be addressed so that patrons and business owners may both receive an improved experience.

Increased use of GPS for directions- The content posted by many businesses in the region is not currently up to date or accurate in many instances. Without updated social media pages and websites, potential customers are struggling to locate and visit many of the businesses within the region.

Immediate Priority #3 Recommended Actions:

The third and final immediate action that can take place to help improve the economic development within the region includes improvement upon the current website and social media presence of the business. As mentioned, many businesses are not running sufficient social media pages that will attract and inform new and existing customers. This could be due to a lack of time or knowledge, or they might think having Facebook and Instagram is optional. However, it is imperative that this issue gets addressed because social media marketing is becoming more popular than ever thus critical to business success.

Action 1: Partner with WCU College of Business for student resources-The specific action to address this issue includes a partnership between WCU and the local businesses to allow students to assist with social media needs through an internship. This would be a win-win for both parties because students are constantly looking to gain experience, and what better way than to gain experience than while helping the local community. The knowledge and experiences from the students would bring a fresh new approach to social media marketing for the businesses. Currently, not all businesses utilize both Instagram and Facebook and some of those that do, unfortunately, need to post more to keep the content relevant and exciting. There is no internship program like this offered currently by Western Carolina University but there is the potential to develop one in a relatively short amount of time. Additionally, a student form of a digital marketing certification could be a draw for students looking to add applicable, real-world experience and certifications to their resume.

Potential Resources needed:

a) WCU Faculty/staff and students (Internship)- The human resources needed for this action would include the faculty/staff of WCU that are willing to coordinate such a program and the students that are wanting to complete a social media marketing internship with local businesses. Finally, we must have business owners who welcome assistance from students. Fortunately, overall, this action will be relatively low-cost. The businesses would have to be willing to pay the student intern a wage to make the internship competitive and attractive. This would be a symbiotic relationship for the

business owner and the student because financially, it would be less expensive to hire a student intern versus a full-time social media manager and the student gets much needed on the job experience managing a business' social media pages. Lastly, the physical resources include having an employee or professor to match businesses with students who want to participate.

b) WCU College of Business MGT 404 Faculty (course design) The leaders of this action might be the management faculty located within the College of Business at WCU. They would be able to connect their students directly to this opportunity by word of mouth while in their classes and the professors would also be responsible for reaching out to potential business owners who might benefit from the students. This is similar to what some professors do to conduct a client project in their business capstone (MGT 404) courses.

Expected Outcomes:

- a) **Increased social media activity**-The anticipated impact of this action is that if social media pages can be revamped, businesses are almost guaranteed to see an increase in business. Western brings in a young population to the area, which cares about a business's social media presence when judging if they will check out the establishment.
- b) **Accurate Up to date information**-Posts not only showcase food items or products in stock at retail stores and dining, but they are a great way to update customers on early store closings or other unexpected issues.
- c) **Competitive business community**-Businesses within the region must have excellent social media pages if they wish to be competitive in the future and by utilizing students' social media experience, this will hopefully become a reality, driving more commerce in the region.

Short and Long-Term Priorities and Implementation

Throughout this report, we have identified the lack of WCU's involvement in Southwestern North Carolina to be a major factor in holding economic development back. With a student body of over 12,243 (Fast Facts, 2022) and facilities/resources that could be used to serve as a hub for the region, we believe economic development priorities should primarily be focused around the university. By incorporating students into the region's target market, the region should benefit greatly. Also, as parking seems to be a problem in most downtown areas of the region (Secret

Shopper Complete Analysis, 2022), we believe there is a feasible fix. Below is a list of our suggested short-term (1-3 years) and long-term (3-5) priorities.

Short-Term Priorities:

- Improve Downtown Public Parking Visibility
- Better Communication of Regional Activities and Opportunities to WCU Students

Long-Term Priority:

- Develop an Incubator for Student Entrepreneurial Ventures on Western’s Campus

Short-Term Priority 1: Improve Downtown Public Parking Visibility

One short-term priority businesses within the region can achieve is the improvement of visible public and private parking within downtown areas. Currently, most downtown areas provide both public and private parking, but they are difficult to locate if one is not familiar with the area. Secret shopper data showed that businesses averaged a 3.96 on parking and accessibility (Secret Shopping Complete Analysis, 2022), just below the satisfaction level. By providing more visible signage for downtown parking areas, businesses have the potential to gain more customers and revenue, as the current situation drives some away. Many tourists, locals, and local college students are not willing to spend excessive amounts of time trying to find a parking spot and not have to worry about being towed.

Action 1: Adding clear signage along the roadways directing visitors to close public parking. The signage must also detail if there is a price to park there, how much it costs, and if there is a time limit to parking there.

Action 2: Develop an online parking map that visitors can use to find parking that best fits where they want to be and add a physical copy of this parking map to the visitor center for each town. Currently, most of the counties within the region do not offer a parking map online or within a visiting center.

Potential Resources Needed

- a) **City Councils and Public Works Department:** To complete this goal, the region must use the resources of city councils and public works departments to take count of how many parking lots are available and their max occupancy.
- b) **County financial support:** Funding support is needed to pay for the development of the map, including paying for the labor of website or app developers who can make the map and maintain it.

Short-Term Priority 2: Better Communication of Regional Activities and Opportunities to WCU Students

Another short-term priority for the region is the improvement of communication of regional activities and opportunities for Western Carolina University students. Majority of WCU students are unaware of what is offered within the region, and it will be beneficial to establish these students as a target market for the businesses of this region. This can be achieved through three main objectives, including

Action 1: Updating orientation field trips to teach incoming students more about the area

Action 2: Providing information packets detailing local activities and businesses to students at orientation

Action 3: Developing a network for upperclassmen that recommends local activities and businesses (similar to RISE Sophomore Experiences)

Starting students off in the right direction when they begin college is imperative. In an interview conducted with a family member of a potential student that attended the honors college orientation, he said, “nothing was said about things to do off-campus” (citation). WCU can improve the incoming freshman class orientation experience with the addition of orientation “field trips” that bring groups of freshmen to activities and businesses. This would be used for several reasons, as it will help the students build relationships with other freshmen, but primarily will help them grow comfortable with venturing out into the region rather than just staying on campus throughout the school year. During the student focus group, it was mentioned that many freshmen simply don’t leave campus as they are unaware of what is available and are not comfortable venturing out on their own. By providing these field trips during orientation, the incoming students would be brought out into the region with authority figures, helping them feel safe with venturing out.

Potential Resources Needed:

- a) Some orientation field trips are already in action, such as Brian Boyer’s freshmen orientation rafting trips that were available during the orientations of Fall 2022 freshmen. To enact more of these trips, **data will need to be collected from the WCU orientation department on the success rates of the current trips**. This will need to include how many orientations are held throughout the summer, the average number of students that attend each session, and the average of how many students from each session attend the current field trips.

- b) **Leaders that fulfill this objective will come from the WCU orientation department and the WCU economic development department.** Resources will need to be pulled together to establish the transportation of the freshmen, partnerships with the businesses that would be visited, additional training and payment for orientation leaders, and possible grants to fund these trips.
- c) It will also be extremely beneficial to **develop informational packets that detail local activities and businesses from the region.** These packets would be handed out to freshmen during their orientation sessions, giving them a centralized source of information about things that their demographics enjoy, which will be a huge step in bringing more awareness of the region to WCU students.

These packets will contain an organized list of local activities and businesses that have proven to be beneficial to the student demographic. The information will include the address, contact information, and a description for each location. They can easily be printed through WCU's print shop after the entrepreneurship department gathers data on these locations, which would then be written by the orientation department.

- d) Experiences shared by the student focus group suggest that most students currently receive the majority of information about off-campus activities through word-of-mouth. Due to this, we suggest the **development of a network that connects and informs upperclassmen about local activities and businesses they would enjoy visiting.** Many upperclassmen have little knowledge of the surrounding region due to hindering factors such as missing proper orientation due to COVID-19, lack of organized sources of information, and misinformation from other students. By establishing some form of network amongst upperclassmen, students will become much more involved in the region and spread their newfound information to their friends and future WCU students.

A WCU-monitored social media account will likely be the best source of a factual network among students, especially with the added help from campus activity programs such as RISE Sophomore Experiences, which aim to help inform and connect sophomores on campus. The objective will likely need resources such as a marketing team to establish and monitor the social media account, which can be fulfilled using WCU students and faculty from the marketing department and possibly be used as a class or internship.

By establishing the social media account, WCU students will see firsthand as their peers enjoy activities throughout the region, giving them both incentives to visit and a centralized source of information about activities and businesses in the region.

Long-Term Priority: Establish an Incubator through Western Carolina University

Two major objectives of focus in the state and regional economic development reports were the fostering of entrepreneurial activities (Southwestern NC Economic Development District, 2022, p. 17) and building or retaining a skilled workforce (Southwestern NC Economic Development District, 2022, p. 29). As WCU is currently expanding its entrepreneurship program, we believe there is a significant opportunity to start an incubator on campus. This incubator would start small, with students who have developed their own “hobby” businesses, and if successful, expand to businesses that can be opened and operated in the region.

Actions include:

Action 1: connect with campus facilities to find a suitable, open location for the incubator. We will also need to identify the students who have already started “hobby” businesses across campus to fill the incubator.

Action 2: Develop a system to pair entrepreneurship students (who excel at business start-ups and operations) with these businesses to increase opportunities for success.

A marketing group called student-made has already made its presence known at WCU (see @studentmade_wcu on Instagram). This group helps promote student-made products and is a great way to find entrepreneurial ventures suited for the incubator. In the future, a partnership could be made with student-made to help market the products.

Potential Resources Needed:

- a) There will be a clear need for **grants to get the incubator off the ground**. These students most likely will not have the capital needed to start their venture.
- b) As its main action is to ease start-up processes, **the incubator will need to offer low rent and incentives to students**. These incentives could include technology. For instance, the resources needed for the business to create an online platform.
- c) Finally, the process of creating the incubator will **require leaders** (most likely from the entrepreneurship department), whether it’s professors, temp hires, or students.

Expected Outcomes: If the incubator is successful, we expect more students to stay in Southwestern North Carolina. Success in the incubator will show these students that operating their business is a feasible opportunity in the region, and they do not need to move to a new area to have it work. Since these students will also most likely be graduates by the time their business is out of the incubation period, it also meets the ED goal of attracting and retaining a skilled workforce for the region.

CONCLUSION

The recommended goals include implementing more resources that bring information about the region to WCU freshmen, thus increasing awareness of the local activities and businesses. By establishing more orientation field trips, WCU can help incoming freshmen feel comfortable venturing into the region independently or with their friends. Another recommendation is developing informational packets that list each establishment's address, contact information, website, and description. The school would give these packets to incoming freshmen and staff. Both concepts aim to get the WCU community into the region more often.

If the Southwestern North Carolina region aims to build a larger skilled workforce, then the answer is the students at WCU. These students believe they have yet to have further opportunities in the area after graduating with their degrees. By developing an incubator that students can use to run their business ideas successfully, they will realize that there are economic opportunities to stay and operate their businesses in the region. In turn, other students may see this success and decide to stay in the area, increasing the skilled workforce pool and luring businesses outside the region to establish their branches.

Infrastructure is a complex topic when it comes to the mountains. Areas like broadband and parking are currently poor and need improvement, but realistically it will take ample time and money to bring significant changes. Short-term improvement can be made by increasing this understanding for residents and tourists.

While parking accessibility in downtown areas across the region needs to be improved, there is not enough buildable land. Providing resources that can help guide people to current accessible parking is an improvement, however. Broadband access will take enormous capital to reach the current standard, but it is still leaps and bounds ahead of where the region was ten years ago. Advances can be made at a steady pace by continuously making residents aware of the benefits of high-speed internet and the steps they can take to effect change.

This research provided a hands-on practice for learning about economic trends and regional improvement needs. Like other residents, this class was completely unaware of the issues in the region. Through research, we gained a deeper awareness and understanding of these issues. We developed ideas that have the potential to help businesses, residents, and students' quality of life in the region.

This course, in essence, is a supporting example of one of our recommended economic development priorities. Promoting student and university involvement in the community opens a new horizon to a sustainable economic environment. Every class member has worked diligently to bring the best and most feasible actions, proving that students want to help; they just have to know what they can do.

On behalf of the school of business at WCU and those affiliated with drafting this report, the opportunity to partner with CREATE BRIDGES has been an enriching experience worthy of much gratitude.

Any questions can be directed towards one of the following project members:

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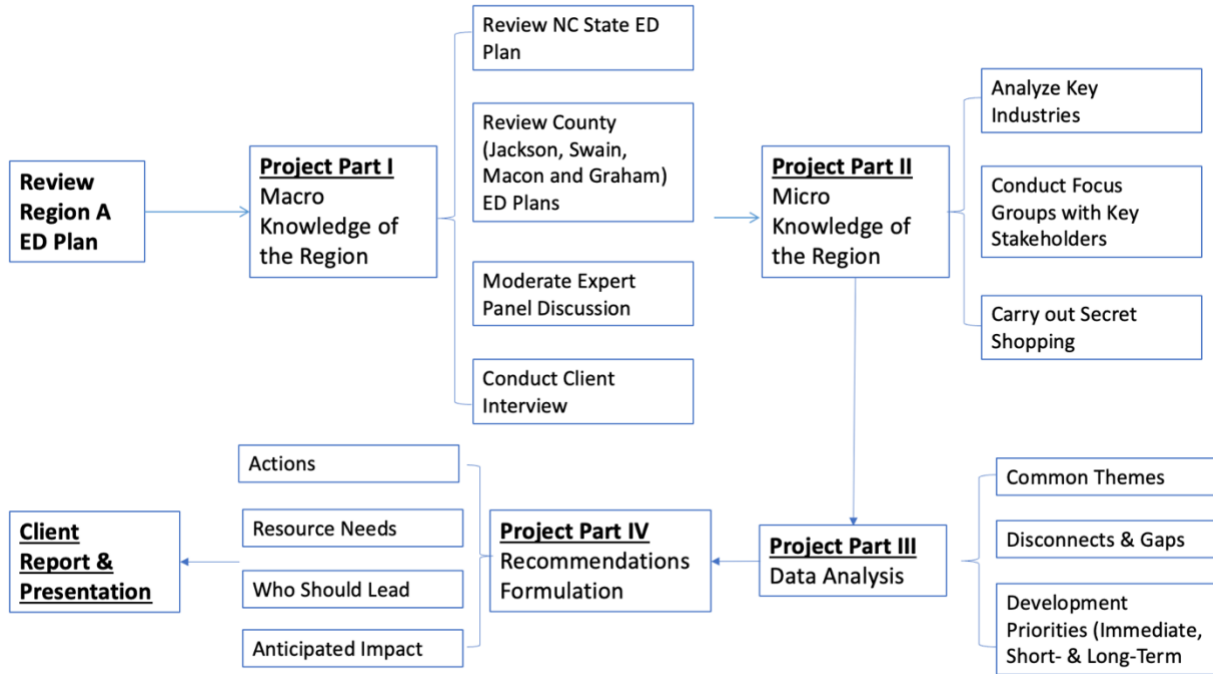
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APPENDIX A – PROJECT FLOW DIAGRAM



APPENDIX B – IBISWORLD INDUSTRY CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

Entertainment Industry

US INDUSTRY (NAICS) REPORT 71 / ARTS, ENTERTAINMENT AND RECREATION

Arts, Entertainment and Recreation in the US

Report by: Kimberly Troncoso | August 2022

Key Success Factors

IBISWorld identifies 250 Key Success Factors for a business. The most important for this industry are:

Protection of intellectual property/copyrighting of output: Protection of an artist's intellectual property ensures that they receive royalties.

Ability to quickly adopt new technology: Artists must be able to use social media and digital technology to publicize and distribute their work, while operators, such as amusement parks, must keep up with the latest technology to remain attractive.

Having a loyal customer base: Having a loyal fan base is an especially important success factor for artists and sports teams, though it plays a role in most all areas of this sector.

Access to multiskilled and flexible workforce: Ability to access a quality and flexible staff is important to enhance visitor experience and mitigate labor costs.

Proximity to key markets: Operators should choose locations near areas with significant populations and domestic and international visitors.



F&B Industries

US INDUSTRY (NAICS) REPORT 72 / ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD SERVICES

Accommodation and Food Services in the US

Report by: Thi Le | August 2022

Key Success Factors

IBISWorld identifies 250 Key Success Factors for a business. The most important for this industry are:

Close monitoring of competition: Monitoring competition enables operators to offer competitive pricing and services, enabling them to remain successful.

Having a good reputation: Maintaining a good market reputation ensures that reviews by travel and food guides will likely be positive, which encourages more consumers to dine or stay at sector establishments.

Proximity to key markets: Location is particularly important for operators in the accommodation subsector, which should be located close to key travel destinations, and operators in the food services subsector, which should be located in high-foot traffic areas.

Ability to control stock on hand: Monitoring inventory is important so operators are never short on popular items nor have excess levels of inventory.

Access to multiskilled and flexible workforce: Access to multiskilled and well-trained staff is vital as operators must be able to provide quality service.

Ability to pass on cost increases: Operators that are able to pass on increases in their purchase costs are able to maintain higher levels of profit.



US INDUSTRY (NAICS) REPORT 72211B / ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD SERVICES

Single Location Full-Service Restaurants in the US

Report by: Thi Le | June 2022

Key Success Factors

IBISWorld identifies 250 Key Success Factors for a business. The most important for this industry are:

Access to multi-skilled and flexible workforce: Access to suitably skilled and trained staff on hourly rates is required to meet peak customer demand periods.

Ability to quickly adopt new technology: Owners need to adopt new employee training as well as kitchen and customer-related technology to increase productivity and lower labor costs.

Attractive product presentation: The atmosphere and ambiance of a restaurant are important to attract and retain guests.

Proximity to key markets: It is important to be in a good, easily accessible location that is close to target markets.

Ability to control stock on hand: Controlling orders, stock and food waste, which are all major cost areas, can reduce unnecessary expenses.

Ensuring pricing policy is appropriate: To maintain costs and profit on meals, owners must ensure that menu pricing/portion control process is undertaken thoroughly.



Coffee & Snack Shops in the US

Report by: Thi Le | August 2022

Key Success Factors

IBISWorld identifies 250 Key Success Factors for a business. The most important for this industry are:

Having a clear market position: Having a clear market position against competitors in the limited-service industry and other food service operators is a necessity.

Effective cost controls: Cost controls with minimal waste are important in this low-margin industry, particularly related to food inputs.

Ability to franchise operations: Franchising in the United States and abroad is now a significant component of this industry and can provide significant support to owners.

Product is sold at high-profile outlets: It is important to have high-profile locations for stores, with easy access, parking and drive-through services for customer convenience and service.

Market research and understanding: Companies need to monitor market and consumer needs, wants and desires, particularly in relation to demand for healthy foods.

Access to multiskilled and flexible workforce: Businesses need to have access to a good supply of skilled, seasonal workers to meet peak demand periods.



Craft Beer Production

Report by: Christopher Lombardo | August 2022

Key Success Factors

IBISWorld identifies 250 Key Success Factors for a business. The most important for this industry are:

Establishment of brand names: Successful branding through logo design, labeling and advertising is critical to success in a brand-competitive market.

Control of distribution networks: New entrants must have access to distribution networks including wholesale distributors to get their beer sold at restaurants, bars and other retail locations.

Marketing of products: Innovative and offbeat branding, packaging and marketing help operators differentiate their craft beer from corporate brands.

Effective quality control: Quality and taste are important competitive factors among craft breweries. Operators need to keep flavors consistent batch after batch and ensure high quality.

Management of seasonal production: In addition to brewing year-round flavors, producers must continually rotate several additional beer styles every few months to take advantage of increasingly popular seasonal drinking trends.



Lodging Industries

US INDUSTRY (NAICS) REPORT 72111 / ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD SERVICES

Hotels & Motels in the US

Report by: Jared Ristoff | July 2022

Key Success Factors

IBISWorld identifies 250 Key Success Factors for a business. The most important for this industry are:

Access to multiskilled and flexible workforce: Access to multiskilled and well-trained staff is vital to success in the industry.

Being part of a franchising chain: There are many benefits to being part of a chain or franchised group, namely brand recognition, national marketing and quality control.

Receiving the benefit of word-of-mouth recommendations: Good word-of-mouth recommendations are quite often the most successful promotional tool.

Proximity to key markets: The location, facilities and services offered to hotel and motel guests are very important.

Ability to quickly adopt new technology: It is essential to be aware of the new technology available in this industry for information, promotions, bookings and general management control systems.

Ability to control stock on hand: Understanding the various room stock, availability and tariff mechanisms used in this industry is important.



US INDUSTRY (NAICS) REPORT 72119 / ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD SERVICES

Bed & Breakfast & Hostel Accommodations in the US

Report by: Thi Le | July 2022

Key Success Factors

IBISWorld identifies 250 Key Success Factors for a business. The most important for this industry are:

Market research and understanding: Operators must continually monitor clients' needs and satisfaction levels to stay attuned to any key market or customer changes or requirements.

Development of a symbiotic relationship with another industry: It is important to develop relationships with other local tourism operators and attractions, particularly with local food producers and wineries, both as a source of referrals or to provide guests with dining or sightseeing recommendations.

Must have license: All necessary state licenses must be held and regulations and standards must be met on an on-going basis.

Having a good reputation: Word-of-mouth recommendations and online reviews of establishments are essential because they are necessary for repeat and new guest visits.

Attractive product presentation: The property must provide the appropriate facilities and ambiance to cater to their target market and also offer facilities that provide a clean, safe and secure environment (particularly in hostels).

Ability to quickly adopt new technology: A successful establishment nowadays must have adequate property information, as well as reservation and confirmation capabilities available on the internet or by e-mail.



Retail Industry

US INDUSTRY (NAICS) REPORT 44-45 / RETAIL TRADE

Retail Trade in the US

Report by: Brigette Thomas | August 2022

Key Success Factors

IBISWorld identifies 250 Key Success Factors for a business. The most important for this industry are:

Experienced work force: Operators may benefit from employing experienced employees who can provide a pleasant experience for consumers through good customer service and clear knowledge of products being sold, both in-store or via online chats.

Having a clear market position: Clear branding and marketing assists consumers in identifying stores with particular goods and brands.

Having a loyal customer base: By working to build strong relationships with consumers operators can encourage repeat buyers.

Close monitoring of competition: Monitoring competition enables operators to offer competitive prices while ensuring the range and quality of their products matches those of other players.

Ability to control stock on hand: Operators must ensure that popular items are reordered and prevents the build-up of excess stock.

Economies of scale: Operating as part of a chain, franchise or co-operative helps to provide buying and marketing power to players.



APPENDIX C – FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Focus Group Plan Sheet

Preparation	
Goal:	<p style="margin: 0;"><u>Checklist</u></p> <p style="margin: 0;"><input type="checkbox"/> Agenda</p> <p style="margin: 0;"><input type="checkbox"/> Script</p> <p style="margin: 0;"><input type="checkbox"/> Questions</p> <p style="margin: 0;"><input type="checkbox"/> Recorder</p> <p style="margin: 0;"><input type="checkbox"/> Notepad</p> <p style="margin: 0;"><input type="checkbox"/> Pencils/pens</p> <p style="margin: 0;"><input type="checkbox"/> Computer</p> <p style="margin: 0;"><input type="checkbox"/> Name tags</p> <p style="margin: 0;"><input type="checkbox"/> Watch</p> <p style="margin: 0;"><input type="checkbox"/> Responsibility assignment</p> <p style="margin: 0;"><input type="checkbox"/> Refreshments</p>
Context:	
Participants:	
Tips/Reminders:	

A. Draft a **Participant Consent Form** to be distributed to participant at the start of each Focus Group.

B. Focus Group Opening Script:

1. **Welcome:** Thanks for agreeing to be part of the focus group. We appreciate your willingness to participate.
2. **Introductions:** Moderator and assistant moderator
3. Introduce Focus Group **Purpose:** The reason we are having these focus groups is to find out_____. We need your input and want you to share your honest and open thoughts with us.
4. **Ground Rules**
 - a. We want you to do the talking
 - i. We would like everyone to participate
 - ii. I may call on you if I haven't heard from you in a while
 - b. There are no right or wrong answers
 - i. Everyone's experiences and opinions are important. Speak up whether you agree or disagree.
 - ii. We want to hear a wide range of opinions
 - c. What is said in this room stays here
 - i. We want folks to feel comfortable sharing when sensitive issues come up
 - d. We will be tape recording the group
 - i. We want to capture everything you have to say
 - ii. We don't identify anyone by name in our report. You will remain anonymous
5. **Address Any Questions or Concerns Before Starting**

C. Focus Group Questions (max 10) presented in sequence:

D. Team Member Responsibility Assignments:

E. Closing Script: Invite participants to reflect on the main ideas, and ask if they have any additional thoughts to share. Thank the group for participating; let them know how the discussion results will be used.

Focus Group Qualtrics Data Entry Survey
(See Flash Drive)

APPENDIX D – SECRET SHOPPER PLANNING

Secret Shopper Plan Sheet

Secrete shopping is a type of participant observation used in qualitative research aimed to measure service quality in a defined context. Secrete shopping is not only about sending shoppers to chosen venues, other approaches such as mystery calls or emails can also provide insight into the quality of services.

Step 1: Define Objectives

Step 2: Review the following secret shopper experience factors shared by client

<p><u>Discovery</u> Was there information about the business online and was it accurate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address • Directions • Hours and Days of Operation • Phone Number posted, correct, easy to contact • Accessibility 	<p><u>Access</u> Was there visible signage to help locate the business Parking and accessibility Is the entrance easy to locate</p>
<p><u>Welcome</u> Clear layout of business Greeting by salesperson, host, cashier, server or guide in a timely manner Was the employee: Professional Efficient Friendly Knowledgeable about the products/menu Knowledgeable about the area Dressed appropriately for their work Working in a hygienic manner (gloves when necessary, sanitizing shared pens, menus, surfaces, etc.)</p>	<p><u>Experience</u> Age Ranges it would appeal to Inclusivity Accessibility Product Options and Availability Value (based on product was pricing reasonable) Appearance of business Quality of service Quality of products/food and selection Cleanliness Safety measures and signage How likely would you return</p>
<p><u>For Restaurants</u> Were there offerings for dietary restrictions and allergies? Were steps taken with food safety precautions in mind?</p>	

Step 3: In addition to the list above, identify 5 factors/questions that will be used during your secret shopping to evaluate company performance against their industry success factors.

Business Category Industry Success Factors	Secret Shopping Evaluation Factors/Questions

Step 4: Develop 3-5 informal interview questions for tourists to learn about their experience visiting the region.

Secret Shopper Qualtrics Survey
(See Flash Drive)

APPENDIX E – SECRET SHOPPER DATA

(See Flash Drive)