



# Soundings

A quarterly report to the families of Western Washington University students

## Practicing the Healthy Pursuit of Excellence

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Students at Western are high achievers. In high school, they may have been accustomed to receiving special attention, awards and recognitions.

When they first come to Western, they may feel a bit anonymous.

They also will be adjusting to a less structured environment.

To make these transitions easier, Ralph Vernacchia, founder and director of WWU's Center for Performance Excellence, urges students to seek out a subculture, a group of students they can build a community with.

Vernacchia directs Western's undergraduate and graduate programs in sport psychology and has observed that most students coming to Western have already developed some activities they really enjoy that have a social component where they interact with other people. He tells students that identifying other students on campus who also enjoy those activities is a good place to start building a social support group.

Vernacchia urges students to practice the healthy pursuit of excellence. "Success is not all about just going to class and getting grades. It's how you keep everything in balance, being able to step out of academics when you need to so you can be happy."

Finding that healthy balance requires developing a strong work ethic. Successful students learn from experience to break down a project into its individual components, identify the actions they must take, and then stay with it, working step by step.

They also seek out help in developing a workable schedule. Western offers advising programs at every stage of a student's university career. Vernacchia encourages students to take early advantage of these programs. He points out that an advisor can help a student avoid overloading a schedule—three 5-credit classes might look good on paper but the workload could be overwhelming.

As an impartial mentor, an advisor can also help a student determine what GURs and prerequisites are needed on the way to discovering a major and life-long interests.

Successful students also find mentors. "That's one reason I promote athletics," Vernacchia says. "You have a coach and you have teammates, some who are a little further down the road. Mentorship is very important, whether it's working with a faculty member, a club sponsor or getting involved in some other situation where you work closely with a professional."

Attitudes are the intangibles that predict student success. Vernacchia stresses the importance of helping students build confidence by giving them support, but allowing them to make decisions for themselves. He is impressed by the work ethic and confidence he sees in students at Western and gives parents credit. "I don't think parents realize what a tremendous impact they have on their children in terms of values and decision making," he says.

Vernacchia has observed that high-achieving students focus on challenge and mastery. They look at opportunities to do something new or to learn something new as ways to enhance their lives, and then they define the things they need to do, one by one, to succeed. "These are concepts that are universal," Vernacchia says. "They can be applied to a lot of different settings. They are all about an achievement and success orientation. A challenge/mastery/enjoyment orientation is a completely different mindset that sets you up for success; viewing things as difficult/stressful/pressure packed sets you up for not being successful.

Vernacchia has been at Western for 34 years and is confident in telling parents their students are in good hands here. "What we're really concerned about at Western is the healthy pursuit of excellence: achieving a balanced lifestyle where you can enjoy yourself and have the energy to pursue your goals and dreams."



The **Center for Performance Excellence (CPE)** is dedicated to enhancing the performance and quality of life for those individuals who seek personal excellence. Approximately 4,500 individuals have participated in CPE programs, which are open to WWU students and to business groups and community members.

Ralph Vernacchia, CPE founder and director, has traveled with national track and field teams to several world championships, including the 2000 Olympics in Sydney, Australia. He has a Ph.D. from the University of Utah and is the author of "Inner Strength: The Mental Dynamics of Athletic Performance."

For more information, go to [www.wwu.edu/cpe](http://www.wwu.edu/cpe).