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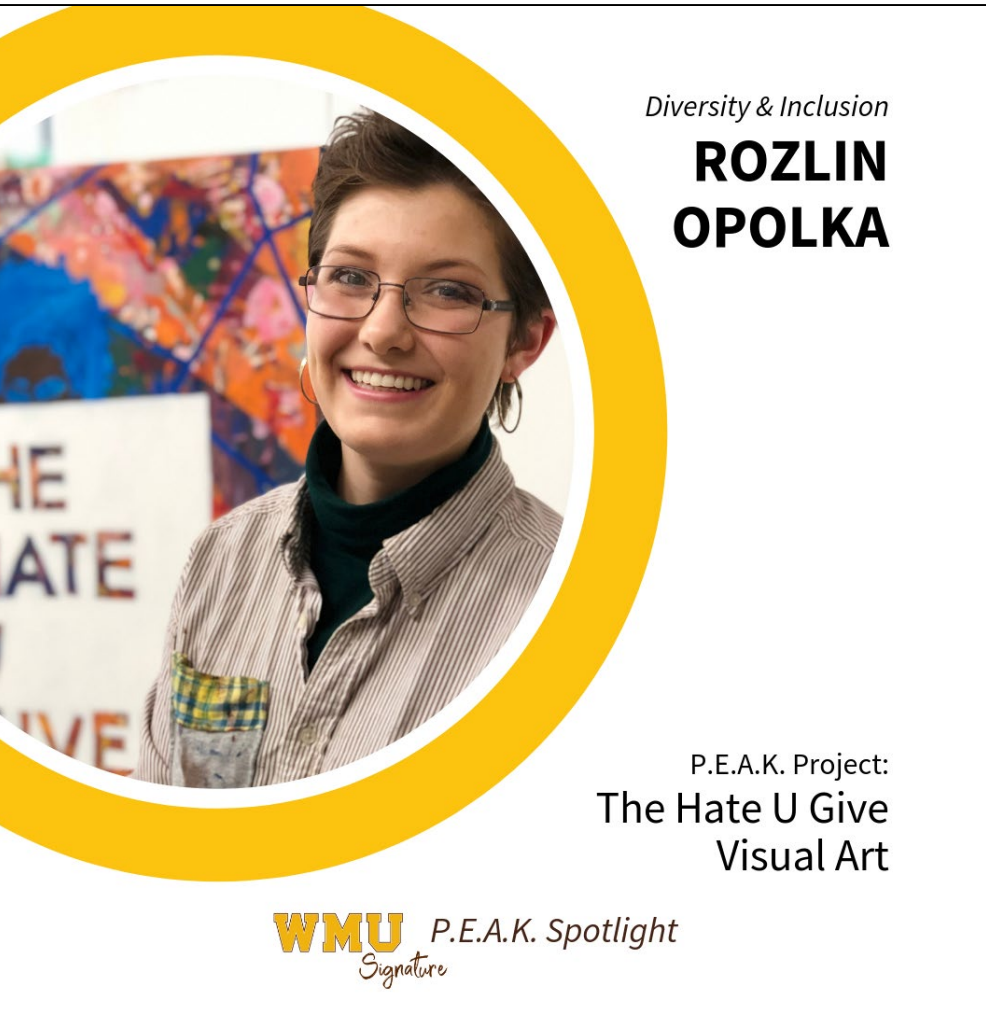


Engagement Through WMU Signature: The Student Perspective

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Introduction

WMU Signature validates WMU students out-of-class learning experiences to help them stand out to future employers and graduate schools. Through WMU Signature students explore and identify a passion and then complete a unique experience of putting that passion into action, earning them a designation on their WMU diploma. All WMU students are automatically enrolled in WMU Signature and students can find designated experiences and track their progress through ExperienceWMU.



As part of WMU Signature, students participate in 12 experiences in the first phase, EXPLORE, and reflect on their experience before declaring a pathway, or passion area. After students have declared their pathway, as part of the second phase, FOCUS, they participate in 6 experiences within that pathway to further explore their passion, continuing to reflect on their experiences. The final phase is the P.E.A.K. (Providing Evidence of Active Knowledge), where students propose and complete a unique experience of how they have put their passion into action.

WMU Signature is built on research showing that co-curricular/extracurricular involvement, especially involvement that includes reflection, increases student’s cognitive and intellectual growth in college as well as their overall satisfaction and retention (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 2009; Quaye & Harper, 2014; Mayhew et al, 2016).

This is WMU Signature’s third year at Western Michigan University and while it has been successful, it is seeking to reach more students and increase engagement across campus. The purpose of this assessment project is ultimately to improve WMU Signature, to better accomplish its mission, and to increase student engagement on campus.



Methods

First, qualitative data was collected through semi-structured one-on-one interviews. Students who have completed WMU Signature but have not yet graduated and asked by email participate in a short interview. Fourteen students were interviewed by an individual who is not staff in WMU Signature. Students were assured that their comments would remain anonymous.

- Interview Questions:
1. Tell me about your WMU Signature experience.
 2. How did you hear about WMU Signature?
 3. Did you think that your experience was meaningful? Why or why not?
 4. How could WMU Signature be improved?
 5. Do you think other students know about WMU Signature?
 6. How could this opportunity be made more attractive to other students?

The second round of data was collected through a survey. The survey was sent to students who have declared their WMU Signature pathway or who have completed one reflection – proxies used to indicate if students are active in WMU Signature. The survey questions were written after the interviews were complete and addressed reoccurring themes in the interviews. The survey was sent to 620 students and 41 students responded.

Interview Results

Students noted their positive view of WMU Signature in the interviews. Interviewees commonly praised the program for making them reflect on their experiences. They appreciated the form that students use to propose their final P.E.A.K project because of its reflective nature. Students commented that they will use their experience with WMU Signature in their life after graduation and that the program was a “natural extension of [their] experiences.” Students noted their positive interactions with the Signature staff and their enjoyment of the P.E.A.K. fair.

Students noted that awareness of the program needs to be increased. This awareness fell into three categories:

1. Clarity about WMU Signature
2. The student body’s awareness of WMU Signature
3. External Awareness (Campus community, other Institutions and employers)

Students believe that if the program requirements and benefits were clearer, more students would be persuaded to join the program. Every interviewee but one said that they do not think their classmates know much about WMU Signature; many interviewees noted the need for more physical presence on campus, “the program would be really good if it were more of a front-line program but I see it more as a back burner program.” Lastly, multiple students noted that increased external awareness would make the program more meaningful. They want their projects to gain more exposure across campus. They also want other universities to have the program so that their WMU Signature designation is more recognizable outside of Western Michigan University.



“Signature was a natural extension of my experiences...I was already doing the work, and this was a cool opportunity to share it and reflect on it even more...this project formalized my approach to teaching and course design; it solidified my pedagogical approach.”
- WMU Signature Student

Survey Results

Q1: How did you hear about WMU Signature? (Select all that apply)			Q2: What is your main motivation for engaging in WMU Signature?	
Medium	Respondent %	Response %	Reason	Percent
Emails form WMU Signature	19.51%	10.26%	Stand out to Employees	31.71%
Other Students	29.27%	15.38%	Stand out to Graduate Schools	9.67%
WMU Signature Social Media	12.20%	6.41%	Personal Development	36.59%
Classroom Presentation	24.39%	12.82%	I already had my requirements done.	14.63%
Orientation	53.66%	28.21%	WMU Signature was easy.	7.32%
WMU Website	19.51%	10.26%		
WMU Faculty and Staff	31.71%	16.71%		

Q3: How would you recommend WMU Signature market itself? (Rank top 2)		Q4: What would you improve about WMU Signature? Or other input for us to make it better. (Sort answer)	
Recommendation	Number of Responses	Recommendation Themes	Number of Comments
Posters around campus	34	Be clearer about the benefits of the program.	9
Classroom Presentations	37	Increase Awareness of WMU Signature	8
RSO Presentations	31	Awareness of qualifying events	4
Social Media	36	Improve events	2
Word of Mouth	33	Other Comments	7

Plan of Action

The data collected from this assessment shows that increase awareness is crucial to WMU Signature. The WMU Signature staff will continue to devote time to making the program requirements and benefits clear, increasing presence on campus and improving external awareness.

- Tangible changes:
- Posters hung up around campus in February 2020.
 - Changed presentations and advertising messaging to highlight benefits of WMU Signature for students.
 - Increased outreach to individual student organizations.
 - Updated “About WMU Signature” presentation to increase clarity and focus on benefits of WMU Signature.

WMU Signature is looking into implementing other improvements that students indicated as well, such as making the designation available on student’s transcripts before their graduation date.

In its third year, WMU Signature is gaining momentum at Western Michigan University. The ideas provided by students are valuable to the program’s growth and continuous improvement. At a minimum, formal assessment of WMU Signature will take place every three years.