Faculty Forum


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Remember the General Faculty Meeting a few weeks ago? I left thinking about the references to faculty voice, appreciating what Terry Kinnear, John Bardo, Gordon Mercer and other faculty had said about moving Western toward a more democratic form of faculty governance but wondering what faculty voice really means at Western. Do faculty have a voice at Western? If so, where is it heard? Certainly not at general faculty meetings, which are always presentations with air-tight agendas. When he apologetically advised us to get up and stretch in the middle of our first gathering of the year, Chancellor Bardo referred to ours as a "talking to" meeting.

I don't like "talking to" meetings, but I may have been corrupted by my experiences at a small private college where I used to teach, where faculty meetings usually involved messy heated debate. There was always an agenda, but the direction of the discussion was not prescribed, and efficiency was not the top priority. The meetings often went on too long, became repetitive, and sometimes were used as an occasion for posturing. Tasks did not always get finished, but the debates were vigorous and lively and helped develop a sense of shared community. I left those meetings sometimes frustrated and angry, other times exhilarated, and occasionally feeling that hard work had been satisfactorily completed.

In an earlier time I was a public school teacher, dismayed to find at "faculty meetings" that teachers sat in student chairs in a classroom and listened--acting very much like students ourselves as the principal talked to us. No pretensions of democracy existed here. These meetings were briefing sessions, pure and simple.

Western's general faculty meetings lie somewhere between these extremes. During my years at WCU, I may have been inspired by an odd speech or two, but I have never been worn out by the effort of a good argument. Fatigued by the tedium, yes. At the end of this year's opening meeting, I fantasized about raising my hand and asking a question along the lines of "have there been any administrative cuts to help pay for adjunct faculty?" Can you imagine someone from the floor asking a spontaneous question at the faculty meeting?

But faculty meetings are not the real problem; they are merely symptom and symbol of an impotent faculty. Dr. Bardo spoke of the faculty at Western as having low self-esteem. I'm still mulling that one over, but I have often felt that faculty acquiescence is rewarded and has resulted in a "culture of silence," characterized by faculty resistance to speak. Many untenured faculty have told me they will not feel free to speak up until they get tenure. Seven years is a long time to be quiet, and I wonder if anyone quiet and passive for so long will ever speak. I've also heard
tenured faculty say they won't speak out if they disagree with the administration. Some say they don't want the retribution of low raises and others say they gave up a long time ago. What's the point? they ask, cynically. They've learned from experience.

Perhaps faculty reticence is historical, going back to the early seventies when the faculty forced a chancellor out of office. Lore has it that he was replaced by an authoritarian chancellor who told faculty what to do, when to do it, and how to do it. But the large faculty turnover of the 80s and 90s would seem to argue against such an explanation. At my college faculty meeting the other day, the dean presented figures indicating that almost 50% of the present faculty began their jobs at WCU since the mid 1980s, long after the uprising of the early 70s became a fading memory.

The voicelessness of the faculty could be a result of a structure that prevents faculty power while protecting administrative power. I know of faculty--among the most vocal and respected on campus--who refuse to serve on certain committees because of severely frustrating past experiences. They took their charges seriously (for example TPR, Grievance, or Hearing Committees), and did a tremendous amount of work but were left feeling not only unheard but disregarded. Many of the important committees function only as advisory to the administration; their recommendations are only heard if the administrator in charge chooses to listen. The faculty end up having only a token voice ("yes, the faculty voted but the administration didn't like the result, so they ignored the vote"). Why bother if all that work, time, and effort are disregarded? Why not just retreat into your specialty and do the work that counts (teaching and research)? Let the administration run the university; they get paid to do so.

These attitudes (and I have been guilty of holding some of them myself) stand in the way of progress. Western is, after all, a place of teaching and learning where ideas should be discussed, debated, and deliberated. Universities help perpetuate democracy. If the faculty at a university are not free to use their voices, where will that freedom exist?

At last year's general faculty meeting, Terry Kinnear spoke of faculty rights and responsibilities, pointing out that every faculty member has the right as well as the responsibility to use his or her voice. We have a historic opportunity. The chancellor seems sincerely interested in faculty involvement in governance, and the head of the Faculty Senate takes faculty power very seriously. Several Forum Assemblies have been organized as an attempt at presenting the faculty voice. And even the general faculty meetings look different today: Rather than an intimidating panel of vice-chancellors presiding, we now have only one administrator on stage.

I'm advocating neither anarchy nor Quakerism, but if we are to reverse the culture of silence, we have to be willing to argue and disagree and debate. We have to send a clear message that sitting like sheep in faculty meetings is unacceptable. Nor is it wise to continue the protectionist tradition of playing the role of mere advisers. We need real change at both the structural level and the individual faculty level. In other words, Faculty Senate should work to establish faculty power, and individuals should use their voices regardless of tenure status, potential for retribution, or cynicism. If we want to transform the culture of faculty silence at WCU we had better start talking and working together for change.
Mary Jean Herzog--Administration, Curriculum, and Instruction

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Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "The Culture of Silence," by Mary Jean Ronan Herzog, 9/1/97

I would like to respond to Mary Jean Herzog's call for faculty at all levels to speak out and break the sounds of silence at WCU. I think it's a great idea. I even have some confidence that the current administration (particularly since the most recent changes) would really accept and encourage such a thing.

I've always believed in speaking out. I was as idealistic and iconoclastic as any young faculty member when I came here in the late '60's. I took academic freedom for granted and I "told it like I saw it." However, I have found that academic freedom is only a limited shield against those with power over your conditions of employment. In light of my experience, I think anyone who is thinking about free expression here should choose their ground carefully and make sure the cause is worth the sacrifice. Because there is a sacrifice.

I was among the "petitioners" in 1974. Though untenured, I kept my job (though I received tenure only on appeal), but I saw three of my untenured colleagues lose theirs. Numerous department heads, and even a Dean, abandoned positions of responsibility in protest. None of them were ever reinstated, and several were overtly persecuted after they rejoined the faculty rank-and-file (low raises, undesirable teaching assignments, verbal abuse by the department head and his favorites, etc.).

I didn't stop speaking out. I was a slow learner, I guess, and it took a while before the cumulative effect of administrative displeasure became apparent; I didn't know I was being hurt. I testified on behalf of a colleague before the Hearing Committee and subsequently got reamed out for it by an enraged (and slightly intoxicated) Dean in front of my colleagues and their families at a picnic. That did get my attention. And his attitude toward me was taken up by my department head and has been maintained and developed by a succession of them ever since.

The tangible effects of administrative displeasure and its enduring consequences have been these: I have been on the no-merit-raise, no-promotion track ever since, in spite of changes in administration and regardless of good (or bad) teaching evaluations, publications, or exceptional departmental or university service activities. I've often wondered whether I'm really that bad, but I look around at my better-rewarded colleagues, and I don't think that's it. I'm disappointed and somewhat discouraged—burned out, perhaps—but I'm still working on improving my teaching, helping grad students, initiating new research, and, though I no longer expect any reward for it, I still do more service than I really have time for. I've never given my job less than 100%, and I think I'm really good at it.

But there are some forms of service I will not do. I will not serve on Grievance or Hearing Committees, for the reasons specified by Dr. Herzog. Been there, done that. No joy. There's conflict of interest inherent in the way those committees are set up, and if the committee respects against an administrator, the administration can and will undercut the decision while letting you know that they are displeased. At least, that's how it was in the '80's and early '90's. And I have reason to know how a high administrator's displeasure expresses itself.

Maybe it's all different now. I'm hopeful, but consider the source: I've thought so before and I've been wrong. My plans for the earliest possible retirement consistent with full benefits are on hold while I wait to see how this episode of the ongoing revolution shakes out. But for those who believe that academic freedom is an absolute, for those considering speaking out like free citizens of a direct Athenian democracy, and particularly for those who have more to lose than just the last few years of a not-particularly-satisfying academic career, I would quote the moral of one of James Thurber's Fables For Our Time, "The Ladybird and the Butterfly": "She who would go unarmed in paradise should first be sure that's where she is."

name withheld by request
Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "The Culture of Silence," by Mary Jean Ronan Herzog, 9/1/97

I agree with Mary Jean Herzog and would like to urge that we hold a broadly based meeting (involving faculty, administrators, and students) on the proposed requirement that students purchase their own computers. This proposal has not been discussed at all except in select groups (and the selection process is unclear to me, based on what I read in the Western Carolinian). If, as rumor has it, this proposal is to be implemented as early as next year, we need time to discuss the issue and its ramifications more fully than has been the case to date. Although this is a prime "faculty governance" issue, an informal poll of my students indicates that many of them have concerns and suggestions that also ought to be heard.

Gael Graham, History

In response to Mary Jean Herzog's thoughtful Faculty Forum piece, I would like to add that Department Heads, being neither fish nor fowl, also lack a voice in the university. "Department Head Workshops" scheduled once or twice a semester by the administration are used for disseminating information. There is not much dialogue or interaction. To gain the opportunity for communication among peers, many heads are meeting at the UCub on a regular basis to identify mutual problems and discuss potential solutions. Appropriate administrators are invited to share their perspectives at selected meetings. Such informal mechanisms are open to all faculty and could contribute much to developing a faculty agenda to present to administration.

Sharon Jacques, Nursing

An excellent piece, but I wonder if there are still contextual barriers to breaking Mary Jean's "culture of silence?"

• Are administrators willing to really be academic "first among equals?" Some administrators have laughed at faculty members who suggested, in committee meetings, that pervasive curriculum issues be addressed on their academic merits instead of administrative considerations. Have you ever noticed that curriculum on this campus is a political matter more than an academic matter?

• Are administrators willing to really foster faculty productivity and quality? Some administrators do not make hard decisions about resource allocation but instead advise faculty members to apply for a plethora of "small internal grants." Have you ever noticed how many times we are forced to compete with each other for the fundamental tools of our trade (a phenomenon which makes beggars of us and creates more losers than winners)?

• Do administrators really believe they exist to support faculty activities—teaching, research, and service? Some administrators apparently function under the philosophy that the faculty exists to support them. Have you ever noticed how many times we perform administrative and support services work for administrators (and how many times our reward for good work is more work)?

If there ever was an example of a dog chasing its tail, it's a faculty attempting to break a culture of silence when the context is not conducive to doing so.

Walt Foegelle, Health Sciences

Mary Jean has exposed one of the deepest roots of WCU's oak tree of resistance to change. During my 17 years here, I have heard lots of faculty voices—mostly whispers in safe havens such as the parking lot or the bathroom—gripping about how we go through the motions of planning, discussing issues, and proposing new ways of doing things, only to find that, after all the smoke clears, nothing of significance is different. But these voices seldom surface in public forums. In spite of increasing retirements and a large influx of new faculty, we have managed to perpetuate a culture of silence.
Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "The Culture of Silence," by Mary Jean Ronan Herzog, 9/1/97

It's gonna take an army of sharp-toothed beavers—to chop down this tree. Simply urging our pre-tenured colleagues to "speak your mind" or "voice your opinion" in the spirit of academic freedom, with no regard for the consequences, may not be the most appealing solution to someone who is looking forward with trepidation to a tenure decision. Replacing administrators won't do it because we've recently done that at many levels. The problem, like a long, fat, poison ivy vine, seems to be entwined around the system. But that doesn't mean we must throw up our hands in despair. Now that MJ has highlighted the problem, perhaps we can begin to nibble away at the bark at least. Here are a few suggestions, for starters:

• Identify someone to serve as an "Academic Freedom Activist" (or ombudsperson, or agent, or some other appropriate title). This person (NOT a committee) would simply receive comments, questions, complaints, etc. from anyone who feels at risk of recrimination and would relay the sentiments anonymously to appropriate parties.

• Expand the role of faculty senators to include seeking out, articulating, and otherwise representing dissenting opinions and minority viewpoints. In Senate proceedings, especially where debatable issues are decided, include a written record of minority opinions and make it clear that such constructive disagreement is valued.

• Develop a written statement about academic freedom and the value of free speech and open dialogue and circulate it for endorsement by all faculty and administrators.

• Promote a grassroots movement among senior faculty to build a "bubble of support" around junior colleagues in department and college meetings. Such support might include routinely inviting thoughts and opinions before adjourning a meeting, and frequently mentioning that open, honest disagreement and airing of different opinions is respected and beneficial.

I think most people on this campus would enjoy a culture that thrives on a vigorous exchange of ideas and considered opinions. Rather than grouse about the problem, let's all give some thought to practical steps toward a more vibrant campus climate.

Ben Ward, Faculty Center

In calling our attention to a "culture of silence," Mary Jean Herzog has given us much to think about. Discussions in faculty meetings at the college and university level have a great deal of merit in a university community. Hopefully we will move forward in this direction.

At various times in the past there were "sanctions" for speaking out, but despite this faculty spoke out anyway on important academic issues and some lost salary advances as well as jobs. This period of "long ago" still lives in stories and myths. In any institution, including universities, those who challenge the status quo will not always be appreciated but as faculty it is not only our obligation to speak out in controversial areas but the primary reason faculty are granted tenure. Despite institutional protections, does it come down to courage? I have known so many WCU faculty members with courage and sometimes even in silence they did the courageous thing. As I think of WCU faculty who have retired, died on the job, or been here for many years, I see in our culture a certain stubborn legacy of dissent and speaking out at the appropriate times. This is counterbalanced by a WCU element of civic courtesy of listening and weighing opposing positions. This legacy, which includes the role of those "paying the price" for speaking out, is an important element that sustains us as we build toward the future.

Gordon Mercer, Political Science and Public Affairs
WCU and Teaching for the Twenty-first Century

When I think of quality teaching and its impact on education for the Twenty-first Century, I think initially of several important dimensions.

First, quality teaching focuses on what the students learn. We know that people generally learn better when they are active rather than passive learners, so the course should be structured to assure that there are active learning opportunities. As the structure and sheer volume of knowledge changes, we increasingly need to focus our courses on ways of knowing, critical thinking, communicating, and independent and group learning. Technology should also be appropriately integrated into the course to assist the student in meeting the educational goals for the class. Finally, we know that people tend to do better at whatever task they undertake if they feel accepted, respected, and valued. Therefore, Western’s tradition of “excellence with a personal touch” seems to address both the intellectual and affective needs of students when (and if) that tradition guides our teaching.

Second, high quality teaching can be expected to have very little impact on a student unless it is part of a coherent program or curriculum. The individual course, while important, is simply a brick in the structure of the student’s education. Each brick may be sound and well-made, but a structure is formed by placing these well-made bricks in appropriate relationship to one another. The quality of the individual class is enhanced and magnified by being part of a coherent plan of study in which each course has a relationship to the others and where the goals of the program are clearly linked to specific courses and course sequences. We should, as a program faculty, be able to explain to each other what our program is about and how each part of it contributes to our students’ learning.

Third, quality teaching for the Twenty-first Century will have a values and behavioral component. The current generation of students has too many members who are “lost” and who do not have a focused sense of values. This seems to be associated with self-abusive behaviors (such as binge drinking and drug use), abuse of others (e.g., date rape), relatively low self respect, and a focus on making money at the expense of other values. [See The Abandoned Generation by William Willmon and Thomas Naylor for an excellent discussion of these issues.] This is not meant to be a condemnation of these students as individuals or as a generation, but merely an observation on the current situation. Therefore, in addition to the more traditional liberal arts and subject matter skills, student-learning-centered teaching will include several specific core educational values. Students will be expected to understand that they are responsible for their own behavior and the effects of that behavior on others. Students will also
be helped to understand the importance of a sense of commitment since commitment is a fundamental requirement for academic achievement. Finally, students will be expected to work with integrity and a sense of personal and professional ethics. We expect these values of our colleagues in our community of scholarship; we should expect no less from our students.

In the current environment, it is not enough for us to assert that our programs are of high quality; we must be able to document that they are. This means that we need to be able to document what our graduating students are capable of doing. This is the fundamental issue underlying assessment of seniors. In my recent meetings with President Broad, she indicated that she felt that our beginning work in assessment of senior-level skills was the most important university-level work in which we were engaged. I agree.

There are at least two philosophical approaches to senior-level assessment that might be considered under the heading of “portfolio assessment.” Traditional portfolio assessment involves the development of a longitudinal record of an individual student’s performances over time. Materials in the portfolio document the growth and development of the student and, when used by a skilled advisor, portfolios can assist in directing the student’s education. An alternative model has appeared relatively recently in the literature. In this approach, the academic program is taken as the unit of analysis (rather than the individual student) and the portfolio is developed at the program level rather than at the level of the individual student. Portfolio contents might include class syllabi, copies of tests and assignments, and a representative collection of the outcomes of students’ work that documents that the goals and objectives of the program are being met. Minimally, documents should show that students know the subject matter and methods of the field; that they can write at an appropriate collegiate level; that they can use technology and other information systems to address the problems of the discipline; that they can think critically about the issues of the discipline; and that, where appropriate, they can use mathematics to solve problems of the discipline.

What also is interesting about this form of program assessment is that, when done well and over time, it gives much of the most critical information needed by the faculty for strategic planning and departmental reporting. When coupled with a clear view of the program faculty’s needs and interests in research, scholarly development, and service, it becomes the strategic plan. Therefore, from a workload and reporting perspective, the senior-level assessment program could take the place of most departmental strategic planning and it also could meet our ongoing requirements by SACS for both assessment and planning.

A final note with regard to teaching. Western is moving rapidly to the forefront nationally in our ability to apply technology to teaching and learning. As a faculty, your work in this area is exemplary. We need to keep this momentum. We have set high standards and are teaching courses at the appropriate level. Our electronics capabilities are the envy of the UNC system (though we know that there is much more we need to have available). We can develop a graduate who is capable of competing with any in the country. We have the faculty and, increasingly, we will have the facilities. Individuals and departments are making great strides. What we need to do is to continue to work together to create a more coherent student-learning-centered educational program. Let’s “stay the course.”
John Bardo, Chancellor

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Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "WCU and Teaching for the Twenty-first Century," by John Bardo, 10/1/97

There was one question in Chancellor Bardo's "Forum" that I would like addressed in more detail. He said that "portfolio contents might include class syllabi, copies of tests and assignments, and a representative collection of the outcomes of students’ work that documents that the goals and objectives of the program are being met." Would this be a short set of materials a student selects from a few (or several classes) or some predetermined group that the program would require? Would the actual tests be part of the portfolio? Who would be the keeper of the portfolio? I am assuming that the total mass of tests taken by a given student would be impractical and inappropriate assessment collection. Or alternatively, would we be expected to maintain old exams of students for a given period of time for potential review? Again, I see an impractical element here: for example, masses of paper or even computer storage files if storage is electronic. If the student was to keep his/her personal collection of old exams, would this even be practical?

Dan Pizzillo, Biology

Dr. Bardo says we need to document the capabilities of our seniors—and I agree. However, we also ought to increase our tracking of what they are doing throughout their time at Western, and after they graduate. One way to do this for graduates would be to provide all alumni with links to their WCU department Web pages. These could be cross-linked to our WCU Alumni page (after all, links cost us virtually nothing but a line of typing). In addition, a worthwhile investment might be to offer Web page space to selected alumni who have no other access to a provider (perhaps people in extremely low-paid service areas, for example, whose work reflects the best of WCU’s efforts). The one condition of such links and/or Web space would be that alumni keep an updated curriculum vita online. This would provide an advantage for graduates, since they would be able to keep in touch easily with professors, other students, and potential employers. It would be an advantage to the university in that it would provide immediate access to demographic information on former students.

Another desirable action would be for WCU to offer all entering freshmen (perhaps in their "intro to college life" course) the opportunity to produce a personal web page. This could become an accessible "portfolio" of their best work at WCU (selected papers, annotated bibliographies, graphic art, music clips, BRIEF videos of dramatic performances, and other projects).

A follow-up course in the senior year (perhaps a component of the senior seminar) would focus on an on-line job market or a graduate school search engine. This course or component could provide advanced skills in the uses of the Web, as well as showing ways in which WCU can continue to support student learning and career development.

Your initial reaction may be, "Ouch! we can't afford the additional expense for this!" However, letting us (and interested people outside WCU) see the actual performances of our students—now, through an on-line portfolio and later through the alumni links—would be an excellent investment for all of us.

Steve Eberly, English
The Plight of Part-Time Instructors: Two Similar Experiences

Considerable work is presently being focused on the study of General Education, and one of the fundamental principles identified by the Review Committee is faculty commitment. I believe any discussion of faculty commitment in the teaching of General Education must examine the existing hiring and retention policies governing the use of part-time faculty. Originally, part-time instructors were hired as a buffer to accommodate fluctuating enrollments. However, what started out as a temporary solution has developed into an ongoing personnel nightmare. What we have now is a significant portion of the University's salary lines going to pay the meager salaries of a number of faculty with temporary status but full-time teaching responsibilities.

There are approximately 500 faculty at Western. Of those, at least 20% have part-time or fixed-term status. In my own department, there are 24 non-tenure track faculty out of a total of 44. Their appointments range from Visiting Assistant Professors to Visiting Instructors (with Ph.D.'s or ABD status), Visiting Lecturers (with M.A.'s), to Teaching Assistants. Most are employed on yearly contracts tied to a 1997-1998 TPR document which states that after three years their employment will be terminated. This revolving door policy has done little to build continuity or community within the Freshman English program, perhaps the most vital General Education program on campus. Faculty commitment cannot be an issue when the majority of those teaching General Education courses must spend time searching elsewhere for a position with a future and benefits. Most importantly, the success of our much publicized integrated computer instruction in Freshman Composition seems bleak when each year faculty must be trained and oriented in the use of the electronic classrooms. Since technology is changing the way we teach, shouldn't we examine how much we value those doing the teaching, even the part-timers? Furthermore, it is time to be honest with ourselves about the quality of the teaching and commitment of those hired at the "last minute," as many part-timers are. If we are indeed committed to "raising the bar" and bringing Western into the twenty-first century technologically, we cannot afford to continue relying on "visiting" faculty to staff General Education.

Several of us across campus have managed to keep our "temporary" jobs by playing "musical visiting positions." One faculty member in the English Department has endured "visiting" status for thirty years. We realize that the University's reliance on this small cadre of experienced and dedicated part-timers is expedient and cost effective. But, at the same time, it is has become demoralizing and exploitative. Fortunately, our dedication to the teaching profession and to Western's students keeps us from tearing up our yearly contracts or adopting the bold tactics of our fellow part-timers at the United Parcel Service. With university costs increasing and "cutback" becoming an administrative mantra, abandoning the use of part-time faculty and
creating a two-tiered but equally valued faculty to meet the growing needs of our students and
projected enrollments seems worthy of consideration.

I realize my view of how Western operates is limited, but in all honesty, after ten years of
teaching and service, I cannot reconcile my commitment with having no job security, health
benefits, retirement, or any hope for advancement. Likewise, I cannot help but wonder where our
General Education program will be academically and technologically if we continue on the
course of considering faculty expendable. Any development of faculty commitment must first
consider the value the institution places on those doing the teaching. How we treat our least
empowered faculty speaks loudly of Western's commitment to teaching.

Linda Kinnear, Visiting Lecturer, English

* * *

Imagine that based upon your expertise in your field you have been recruited to teach on the
faculty of a prestigious university. Imagine that after nine years' service you have gained superior
evaluations from your department head, excellent evaluations from your students, been awarded
grants for study abroad, and are the author of a best selling work. But during these nine years of
faithful service you have seen everyone on campus from the chancellors to the grass cutters get a
pay raise every year. You have seen tuition double and major construction projects completed,
yet your salary has remained the same without so much as a cost of living increase. Imagine that
you may not speak out against these conditions without fear of capricious dismissal.

A paranoid fantasy? Hardly. These are the present working conditions for those who teach here
part-time. While full time faculty earn benefits and wages below the national average in most
departments, some whose contracts require them to teach as much as 10 hours per week, both
semesters, are paid less than $5,300 a year. Any institution which doubles its prices for services
(tuition) yet refuses to increase the wages for those responsible for providing those services
cannot escape ethical scrutiny for long.

It is time to face up to this institutional pattern of exploitation. We have been ignored as if our
very existence were an embarrassment to the tenured faculty and the administration. But the
service of the part-time faculty is needed now and will be vital to the success of the university in
the future. Yet those who provide these essential services have no job security, no bargaining
power, and are permitted no role in university governance. The vital link between instructors and
control of the curriculum they teach is absent, as part-time instructors have no representation.

It is well past time that the university acknowledge its responsibilities to all its faculty regarding
governance and compensation. Every year the legislature appropriates funds to raise faculty
salaries, but these funds have been denied those who have no organized voice to question why.
Having someone serve as a "visiting lecturer" for ten years is ludicrous, a violation of AAUP
guidelines, and a contradiction in terms.

How long will these highly skilled educators lacking a terminal degree remain an exploited
underclass at WCU? What is needed is a system of rewards that recognizes performance and
years of service. What is wrong with the idea of a tiered hierarchy for promotion of part-time faculty? Harvard has a system whereby an instructor could advance to the rank of junior lecturer and later to senior lecturer, adjunct assistant, associate, and full professor. Ranking non-tenured faculty would serve this university well. It would promote higher standards, give all the teaching staff incentive to perform at their best, and greatly improve morale. This university has much to gain by treating its part-time faculty fairly as valued members of its community of scholars. It has much more to lose by continuing in its present course. The unfair practices currently engaged serve no one well.


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Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "The Plight of Part-Time Instructors: Two Similar Experiences," by Linda Kinnear and Michael Waters, 11/1/97

I've been a Visiting Lecturer going on my sixth year (total), and my usual response to complaints about the way part-time folks are treated is, "you signed the contract; suck it up." While I don't feel I've been fully compensated for my work here, I do feel that I've gained a lot in the way of experience. When I sign a contract, I know what the consequences will be. Never have I approved of a two-tiered system, which I feel would simply institutionalize the second class citizenship of non-PhD teachers. Had I wanted to work permanently for a university, I would have gotten my doctorate and entered the publish or perish race. I don't want that. I want to teach freshmen and sophomores how to write and read for college, so I want to find a position at a community college. I don't believe I can be exploited here unless I allow myself to be.

There are, however, two problems which arise from these situations. The first is that students may suffer. Linda is right about the revolving door and its effects on the continuity of a program. This school advertises its commitment to teaching, but with a very few exceptions that doesn't appear to mean the teaching of freshmen and sophomores. It does seem to mean having tenured faculty who do a great job of teaching their specialty courses. Might this be a contribution to the retention problem?

The second major problem is that part-time folks are denied health care coverage. For five of the years I taught at Western, I was allowed to purchase my own insurance. This year, I am not being allowed to purchase my own health coverage. My contract for the first four classes I'm teaching states that my part-time appointment is 30% (it has been pointed out to me that even slaves were counted as 3/5 of a person); my contract for the fifth class I'm teaching states that my part-time appointment is 20%. But this doesn't add up to half-time and eligibility to purchase my own insurance. My department head attempted to help me, but neither of us was able to decipher the answer. So I had no choice but to spend almost $600 to purchase continued coverage from my terminated policy. In 1991, I experienced a major illness, surgery, and hospitalization while I was uninsured, which, among other things, wiped out my savings and ruined my credit. I simply can't afford to gamble about whether lightening strikes twice in the same place. MLA guidelines for use of part-time faculty states that part-timers should be allowed eligibility for pay increases and benefits. But forget MLA. Part-time faculty should be given health coverage because of what it saves us all in the long run. To deny us the option of purchasing it at a reasonable cost through this university is simply unethical.

I intended to write a letter to a high-level administrator about this situation, but two other part-time folks have told me that their letters to him were ignored. I can't justify wasting my time writing a letter which will most likely be ignored. I have papers to grade and students to help. That's a valuable use of my time.

Gerri Dobbins, English

The true rewards of teaching are not monetary, for if they were, temporary faculty would not exist. The corporate culture of a university with its current monetary reward system, however, still focuses on research and publication, and only permanent faculty are compensated accordingly. Last year, my temporary teaching positions yielded an FTE of 1.08 with a part-time pay of 20% and no other benefits. If teaching were unmistakably the priority in both measure of faculty effectiveness and compensation in proportion thereof, one might conclude that some temporary faculty would be paid more than permanent faculty.

The problem of temporary faculty is part of the crisis of short-term, bottom line, lowest common denominator thinking at work today. The continued fractionalization of the faculty and increase in hostility in this short-term thinking culture is counter-productive. I believe in the search for the truth, not merely some current measurable outcome which is of little significance in the lifelong learning process. Values are too important to be left to others outside academia because intellectual learning cannot be separated from affective learning. Vicariously, though, most students are learning more about values outside of our classrooms by observing how a university operates from day to day and semester to semester.

Business and education have been inundated by the gimmickry of one-minute actions, portability of careers, total quality control of anything, and re-engineering of everything. For many, however, very little seems to make sense anymore. This lack of understanding emphasizes the complexity and sometimes chaos of business and education, but more importantly it points to the loss of meaning in those activities by the very people who must carry them out. In my field many academics have been accused of being irrelevant to the practice of business. If nothing is done about the current crisis in universities, many academics may soon be deemed irrelevant to education.

E M Abel II, Visiting Professor, Business Law and Management
Responses to "The Plight of Part-Time Instructors: Two Similar Experiences,"
by Linda Kinneer and Michael Waters, 11/1/97

The plight of the most exploited segment of our faculty, part-timers, is the most egregious example of a larger problem--glaring disparities in faculty status and salaries at WCU. Kinneer suggests that we abandon the use of part-time faculty altogether and institute a two-tiered system of full-time faculty; individuals on the two tracks would be "equally valued" but presumably not equally paid. My initial response to her proposal was negative. After all, equal work for unequal pay seems inherently unfair. Hence, I dismissed Linda's idea. But, that was before I strolled over to the library and took a look at the new BD-119, which lists all of our salaries.

The truth is that we do not have to wait for Linda's two-tiered hierarchy; we already have one. Compare, for example, annual salaries of assistant professors in the Colleges of Arts and Sciences and of Business. The median salary of the 50 assistant professors in Arts and Sciences is $36,604. In contrast, the 12 assistant professors in the College of Business have a median income of $60,016. These disparities appear to be growing rather than shrinking. First-year faculty in some departments in the College of Business are hired at approximately twice the salary level of new faculty in some departments in Arts and Sciences.

Administrators typically claim that these differences are the inevitable result of market forces. We are competing nationally for good faculty, and, like it or not, a new Ph.D. in accounting can demand and get $25,000 or $30,000 a year more than one in art history. But, is this an unavoidable reality or an untested assumption? The fact is that some universities have rejected the assumption of inevitable differences. California State Polytechnical University at Pomona has recently reverted to a common salary scale across all disciplines, and they are not having trouble recruiting new faculty. Other universities, particularly those where the faculty is unionized (e.g., Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts) have also instituted systems designed to eliminate or at least reduce faculty salary inequities across disciplines. Perhaps it is time for our newly empowered senate to look at this issue as it applies to both full and part-time faculty.

Hal Herzog, Psychology

Linda Kinneer and Michael Waters present a compelling argument; WCU needs to redress inequities of part-time employment. We have been told that enrollment must go up before more money can be allocated to faculty positions. Yet according to the Chancellor's Oct. 15 memo to the faculty, freshman enrollment this term is already up, creating "our second largest class this decade." Is the burden of increased enrollment to be carried by those to whom the university has the least commitment and accords the least compensation? Almost 60% of freshman composition sections this semester are being taught by faculty classified as part-time employees; part-time faculty are teaching over 40 sections of general education English classes. The university is focusing a great deal of attention on retention of 1st and 2nd year students; we need to focus some attention on the faculty who are teaching many of those students.

One argument raised against the kind of two-tier permanent faculty proposed by Kinneer and Waters is that a two-tier system causes discontent and resentment among those in the junior tier. However, the lack of adequate pay, benefits, and professional status experienced by part-time faculty surely has already created discontent and resentment. It is time to try a new approach. A two-tiered faculty system may not be a complete and permanent solution, but it seems to be a move in the right direction towards acknowledging part-time faculty as professional colleagues whose service to the university is valuable.

Sandra Saunders, Visiting Instructor of English

It is clear that part time faculty are used as "slave labor." And it is also clear that we have dug a hole too deep to get out of without additional harm to a large number of people. The best solution is not to be so dependent on part time faculty, but we do not want to terminate employment of many of our part time faculty and we do not wish to increase our teaching loads. Correct me if I am wrong, but the problem seems to be like so many of our other problems--the regulation of part-time faculty has been to a great extent dictated to us by Raleigh.

The second issue is General Education. If we are really serious about GE and about raising the bar, then GE courses should only be taught by tenured or at least tenure-track faculty. Preferably, GE courses should be taught by the most experienced and most senior faculty members. If we are really serious about GE and about raising the bar, then the GE English should be something that we would be happy for our English majors to take, and the GE Math should be something that we would be happy for our Math majors to take, etc.

I believe that GE is very important, but it currently causes some serious problems. One of these is grade inflation. Many students are willing to take a certain number of D's and F's rather than work hard, since they have built up a cushion of A's and B's in GE courses without much effort. One solution might be to use professors with high standards to teach all GE courses on a pass/fail basis. This might seem radical, but in order to solve our retention problem we need to do something greatly different from the other schools.

Richard Stephens, Math
Responses to "The Plight of Part-Time Instructors: Two Similar Experiences," by Linda Kinnear and Michael Waters, 11/1/97

I agree with both of the opinions expressed by Linda Kinnear and Michael Waters. I think it is unfair that we don't pay our part-time instructors adequately and that they receive no benefits. I think the commitment issue is real and, frankly, I am impressed with the job that they are doing, considering the way they are treated. If we can improve their status (salaries, benefits), it will undoubtedly make our raise smaller, and they haven't been all that good for the past 5 years or more. What is really needed here is a system modification from the top down--and not only here at WCU but in all of our institutions.

anonymous

The comments of the two faculty forum pieces are right on the money (no pun intended). While in dire emergencies, the use of part-time faculty might be necessary, it is unconscionable that WCU has developed a "full stable" of these over-worked, underpaid part-time faculty. It is particularly galling to note that, in opposition to the classic "American Dream," these people have no (or very few) opportunities to obtain full-time status and get into tenure-track positions.

The rise of part-time work at low salaries and with no benefits or job security is one of the most frightening manifestations of the present economy. Full-time faculty who think themselves secure in their jobs and thus are unable to empathize with the plight of part-time instructors need to understand that this development has ominous implications for us all.

Gael Graham, History

In my November 3 copy of the Asheville Citizen, I read the following: "Manufacturers of items that carry the Duke University logo will be required to sign a pledge that they don't use sweat shop labor." Hats off to Duke for leading the way in this important human rights issue. I think that we should join them in their effort.

And I think we should go them one better. We should pledge ourselves to ensure that graduates who bear the WCU logo should not be the products of sweat shop labor, particularly in freshman composition and other general education courses. I salute Linda Kinnear for raising this very important human rights issue and challenge our leadership to do something about it.

Karl Nicholas, English

"Plight" is right. Unfair is unfair. I agree with Linda Kinnear's calling the plight of part-timers "demoralizing and exploitative." In a community espousing to be caring, civil, and creative, you would think we could come up with a better plan for the fair pay, career advancement, and university governance for all part-time faculty and staff.

Chris Gunn, Counseling and Psychological Services

Over the years my colleagues in Arts and Sciences (A&S) have chided me about using the language of business while discussing or debating university affairs. At the same time, A&S, as well as other colleges, has engaged in one of the most abusive of labor practices, taking advantage of a labor pool held captive by geography and family responsibilities. The most hard-nosed capitalist would be proud. The irony of this is that A&S is where we are as a University profess the humanities. The second definition of humanities in my Webster's New World Dictionary is "2. The branches of learning concerned with human thought and relations..." Are human relations (note the human) only abstractions? Is not humanism something we should practice as well as profess? An even sadder side to this story is that salary money that could have been added to part time faculty salaries has gone into the pockets of those of us, all of us, who are tenure track faculty. We have had a personal gain stemming from an abusive practice.

I still think that administrators and some faculty (faculty governance) must understand and use the language of business as WCU interacts with those players external to the University. That external environment provides all of the resources that support this University and people in boundary-spanning roles should speak the language. However, I do agree with my critics that there is a place in the heart of the University where that language has no place. That place Pirsig (1974) called the "church of reason." It is here that the Community of Scholarship identifies its values and beliefs, free from the marketplace, and then lives intellectually and practically by them. The observational data suggest that there is divergence between what we say we value and what we actually value. That is fundamentally dishonest. If we as a faculty are truly human in our core values and beliefs, in our "church of reason," then we will see to it that this abusive practice stops. If we are not truly human then perhaps we need to remove the word University from Western Carolina University and call it Western Carolina Factory.

Bill Kane, Management
Responses to "The Plight of Part-Time Instructors: Two Similar Experiences," by Linda Kinneer and Michael Waters, 11/1/97

There are two issues around here (at least two) that have been swept under the rug for years but have recently, for whatever reason, come back into the light. One of these is the issue of part-time faculty, so eloquently addressed by Linda Kinneer and Michael Waters in the last issue of the Forum. Another is the issue of large classes. What these two issues have in common is that they will not go away. Perhaps it is time for both of them to be addressed as openly and equitably as possible. Apparently, we simply do not have the faculty salary money or positions to hire full-time, tenure-track faculty to teach all of the classes presently covered by part-timers. And there are not even enough part-timers to assure that all classes have fewer than thirty students. However, there are things that can be done to make sure that these situations do not have a negative impact on the quality that we offer our students.

The use of part-time faculty does not of itself imply decreased academic quality. Many of our part-timers, and certainly the perpetual part-timers, are very capable and conscientious teachers. After all, if they don't do an adequate job, they simply don't get rehired. But the academic quality suffers when these "visitors" do not receive the support they need from those of us who have a more confirmed connection to the institution. These "visiting instructors" need to be provided with adequate information about our general education philosophy, its implementation, and our standards. Perhaps even before that they need a good sense of who our audience is and what to expect and demand from our students. We also must be willing to share resources such as computer access, office space, and secretarial support. And, of course, the compensation these hard working people receive must be adequate. We have to share the wealth (or lack of it) as equally as possible. Share. That means the rest of us must make sacrifices. The alternative is to try to get by without part-time help, and this is a really scary thought.

The use of large classes, similarly, does not have to equate with poor quality. We advertise that we offer small classes, and we certainly all prefer to teach them that way. In some subjects, small classes are a necessity. But it does not appear that the system will ever provide us with the resources to avoid large classes entirely. Fortunately, there are some faculty who are quite capable of doing a quality job with a larger-than-average class. With support such as supplemental instruction, tutoring, perhaps even paper-grading assistance (all less expensive than full-time tenure-track faculty positions), AND a really dynamic instructor, a large class can be a valid, quality educational experience. In the disciplines and departments where large classes are unavoidable and tolerable, we should place some relatively inexpensive resources to support this necessary evil rather than pretending it does not exist. If we do choose to recognize the large class situation as tolerable, we must modify our general education program to accommodate this teaching alternative. Again, we need to acknowledge and reward the people who can carry this burden for us with success.

Neither the use of part-time instruction nor the teaching of large classes is an element of our institutional ideal. Unfortunately, we do not live in an ideal world. We have been living without consciously recognizing these realities for some time, and we know we aren't happy. Perhaps it is time to consider the realities and the alternatives, suggested above.

anonymous

In response to Linda Kinneer's and Michael Waters' "The Plight of Part-Time Instructors," I'd like to go even further than they and attempt to look at the bigger picture, though only from the perspective of a part-time teacher of composition. The bigger picture, and perhaps the challenge, is this—in a world made more and more inhumane by the "cost-effectiveness" of contingency workers, is the university system not called upon to set a different example? If the university continues to treat part-time instructors as expendable commodities (which we surely are if one goes purely by a supply-and-demand model), then the university is merely following the example set by the corporate world. If we in the field of higher education offer no more compensation for dedication than does, say, Wal-Mart, then we, like Wal-Mart, are purveyors of the cheap and superficial, of the disposable, and, therefore, of the decay of anything like culture. Rather, shouldn't institutions of higher learning be setting an example, searching for deeper meaning in human affairs, demonstrating long-range vision, and intent upon the constant and real improvement of human life?

And while I am well aware of trends in contingency hiring, job retention (or lack thereof), and decreasing benefits in almost every sector of the working world, I continue to hold to the hope that my world, the world of education, still has enough idealism to prevent part-time positions from becoming business-as-usual concessions to complex financial situations. I continue to hope that these positions, which benefit no one in the long run, will not become deeply entrenched as part of financial operations because the ultimate result in the working environment is a lack of cohesiveness, positive feeling, and trust—which even the illusion of job security can help to create. I like to think that a university is still capable of challenging, rather than merely upholding, what is sadly becoming the norm.

Dawn Gilchrist-Young, English
Responses to "The Plight of Part-Time Instructors: Two Similar Experiences,"
by Linda Kinnear and Michael Waters, 11/1/97

I appreciate the comments of Linda Kinnear and Michael Waters in the last edition of the Faculty Forum. Most, if not all, universities in the United States rely on part-time faculty members for a portion of their instruction. Their terms of appointment are generally similar to what we have at WCU. Anyone who follows the Chronicle of Higher Education knows that these issues are being debated nationwide. Our present situation evolved over the years by means of a collegial process that involved full-time faculty and administrators, and a collegial process will be followed to address the issues that we now face. As the number of faculty positions and the funding that we receive are dependent on our enrollment, solutions will not be easy. However, the problems are real and must be addressed.

Richard Collings, Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs
Playing WCU’s Ace Card: Stronger Ties To The Region?

As we grapple together with Western’s most immediate challenges—enhancing the public’s perception of the quality of our programs and increasing the size of our enrollment pool—it might be instructive to explore how closer regional ties can help us. There is growing evidence that when public, regional universities such as WCU aspire to grow in size and quality, an essential first step is to become more highly valued by the citizens in their locale. Two examples—George Mason and East Carolina—illustrate this hypothesis.

In the 1970s, George Mason was a young, commuter institution in the Fairfax suburbs of the District of Columbia. It lacked a distinctive identity until it adopted a clear strategic plan that called for the university to tackle some of the most pressing learning and service needs of Northern Virginia. A public radio station was founded to fill an important cultural niche. Evening degree programs, including a law degree for working persons, were established at convenient locations. Courses by cable television were pioneered to increase access to instruction. Faculty were encouraged to become involved in civic activities, and an applied research unit was created to help apply the expertise of faculty and staff members to problems in the region. Convenient access and proactive service to citizens of all ages in the region led to significant increases in enrollments and enhanced political/budgetary support. The latter was illustrated graphically during a tight budget year in the mid-1980s when the only new faculty positions authorized statewide by the legislature were at George Mason.

At East Carolina, a strong regional identity had been that institution’s greatest asset over the years as it consciously positioned itself as THE university for underserved eastern North Carolina. The tactic’s success was illustrated dramatically by the against-all-odds legislative decision to establish a medical school on the Greenville campus in the 1970s. With a publicly-supported medical school in Chapel Hill and private medical schools receiving state funds for NC students in Durham and Winston Salem, no logical argument was put forth to create a fourth school unless it were to be in Charlotte. But ECU captured the support of influentials from Raleigh eastward and their will eventually prevailed. Regional support was galvanized to create the ECU School of Medicine and provide family practice medical doctors to the small communities in eastern NC.

I call up these examples to illustrate the power of regional loyalty for public universities that do not enjoy statewide or national identities. UNC-Chapel Hill can take for granted its specific obligations within the Triangle area and still maintain its statewide credibility. For institutions such as WCU, however, strong regional loyalties are essential. George Mason parlayed its regional support to compete for international recognition in economics and creative writing. One doubts that such recognitions could have occurred if the university had lacked regional coalitions.
My argument is that WCU can strengthen its position of influence by paying more attention to the learning and service needs of the twenty-some counties in western North Carolina. This will not require us to bend our standards or to become anything other than a responsive institution of higher learning. It also does not mean that all of our attention should be focused locally. It does mean that we make the most of local assets and opportunities; that we identify with the unique opportunities the region offers for teaching, research and service; and that we take pride in these endeavors. Our aspiration should be to become indispensable first to this region--and then, progressively, to the state and beyond.

How to proceed? Certainly, a successful regional strategy should engage the best thinking of our faculty, staff, and regional audiences and include an understanding that the strategy will be evolutionary, changing with emerging needs and opportunities. I would hope that such a conversation can begin immediately. In the meantime, here are some thoughts on the matter that have occurred to me through observations and conversations during the past year.

Define our campus as the region

WCU is blessed with three specific sites at which resident credit instruction can be offered: Cullowhee, Cherokee, and Asheville. We may be the only institution east of the Mississippi with a campus on an Indian Reservation, and Asheville has emerged as one of the nation’s most livable cities. Let’s tout these assets by defining WCU as a diverse, three-campus university. At the same time, let’s take better advantage of opportunities offered at these three sites. Asheville is the region’s urban hub, a source of adult students in our graduate and technical undergraduate programs. Let’s commit to meeting the specific needs of adult students in Asheville. This means sensing the pulse of the adult market and shaping our programs accordingly. Year-round instruction with shorter, more intense courses? Weekend courses? More independent learning? Closer ties with employers? We must be open to these and other changes. Earning the role as Asheville’s graduate school of choice is a worthy objective and could bring many rewards. Ditto for paying more attention to opportunities in Cherokee, where we might forge stronger ties to the Eastern Band and open up more new learning options for our non-Indian students.

Embrace the Region as an Artifact for Learning

The Southern Appalachians reflect a unique cultural and natural history. Have we drawn upon these assets sufficiently to enrich our instruction and scholarship? Would we attract more focused students if we bundled together some of our smaller programs into multi-disciplinary majors in environmental stewardship, rural sustainable development, and eco-tourism management? This approach need not exclude more traditional offerings. Rather, it could assure that WCU takes appropriate advantage of its close-at-hand resources. Have we exploited the benefits of service learning, student internships, and cooperative education? These activities, carefully planned and supervised, immerse students in hands-on learning while breaking down town and gown barriers.

Adopt Regional Issues and Problems for Research
As a provider of technical assistance, WCU’s Mountain Resources Center is the envy of other regional universities seeking to address local needs through applied research. For many businesses, governments, and service agencies, the MRC is their primary connection with WCU. The irony is that we are not taking full advantage of the MRC as a university-wide resource. Too few faculty and their academic departments perceive the MRC as a university broker for research and consultation. Student involvement in MRC’s regional activity is serendipitous rather than intentional. If the MRC were strategically drawn into the academic mainstream, it could become the logical broker for faculty and student participation in the region. The MRC, with its hard-won network of business, industry, non-profit and service contacts, may be our greatest asset for bonding the university and the region. No other public university in NC, except the land grant schools (NC, A&T, and NCSU), has a technical assistance outreach arm similar to the MRC. The challenge is to galvanize its potential as a university-wide resource broker.

These reflections are formative, not definitive. The challenge for WCU, it seems to me, is to construct a strategy for improved public support. For a regional institution, public support begins close to home and then moves outward. First, we prove our value to the neighbors.

Oak Winters, Dean of Continuing Education and Summer School

The opinions printed here belong solely to the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the editorial staff or of the Faculty Center. If you would like to respond, e-mail Nienhuis by the 8th of the month.
Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "Playing WCU's Ace Card: Stronger Ties to the Region?" by Oak Winters, 12/1/97

Oak Winters has some good points. Certainly if we are allowed to expand our regional course offerings to off-campus sites, we may be able to attract more students. There is a problem involved: we are not allowed to offer our regular classes without approval of colleges located in Jackson or adjacent counties (for example, I attempted to offer the lower-level Natural History of the Southern Appalachians course in Hendersonville but was denied the request by Blue Ridge Community College). Additionally, some of our course offerings really do not fit a television or Internet format. One learns, for example, to identify plants by close interaction with instructors, not in some remote ethereal mode. But, the problems may not be insurmountable. It behooves us to consider that we occupy a position in the center of the Southern Blue Ridge Province and do not yet have an Appalachian Studies program established! Surely something along this line would be of interest to many of the new regional residents.

Dan Pittillo, Biology

Oak has laid out clearly how WCU can more fully realize its potential as a regional university. In addition to his detailed examples of how George Mason and East Carolina have benefited from careful integration of their local communities into their plans, I particularly like Oak's suggestions of what Western can do to enhance its use of the area and to increase local support. For instance, stressing our "3-campus" nature (Cullowhee, Asheville, and the Cherokee Reservation) will let us pull together a clearer picture for our regional public of the excellent services we offer. In keeping with this, I suggest we resurrect the Cherokee language program: it never got much attention or support because (I believe) we as a campus did not see it as truly important to our region. Now, in the light of Oak's points, I submit that it might become a powerful focal point in Cherokee Studies on the "Cherokee Campus." While much that we now do makes us a good regional institution, Oak's suggestions can help produce a more widely recognized and publicly understood view of Western Carolina University as a valuable and unique institution. We can capitalize immediately by emphasizing our current programs, but we must also develop a clearer sense of ourselves as a university deeply integrated with our region. I salute Oak Winters for these timely questions, suggestions, and challenges.

Steve Eberly, English

Oak is right on target. Western is perfectly positioned to provide a wide variety of outreach services and programs which will enhance the area and benefit the faculty, staff, and students. I recently had the opportunity to work with the MRC and am embarrassed that I had not done so earlier—they are a great resource for the region, and the university community can (and should) leverage their skills and resources to mutually serve the university and the region.

Jim Pearce, Management

My only reply would be an old song. Has no one considered the possibility that we may be at a good size? That big is not necessarily better? Hasn't a single administrator ever read Thoreau?

Harold Farwell, English

Let me begin by strongly supporting Dean Winters' basic point. The active support of local and regional business and political groups provides the cornerstone for stimulating the growth of both the student body and the academic programs for all but the largest and most internationally recognized of academic institutions. Further, as the institution serves its region (and thus its support base) the
Responses to "Playing WCU's Ace Card: Stronger Ties to the Region?"

by Oak Winters, 12/1/97, continued

support base tends to enlarge beyond its original local and regional foundations. We might look for
eamples even closer to home and cite Appalachian State and UNC Greensboro, both of whom have
grown remarkably in the last few years and are now looking toward "our" Asheville market, along
with the private schools that have recently established degree programs in that city. The fact is that if
we are to learn from these examples, we must work significantly harder than these other schools to
become the "institution of choice" for some constituencies and thus generate the political and business
support we so desperately need. There are at least two reasons for this: (1) we are very late starting
down this road, and the competition is certainly not slowing down or relaxing; and (2) the business
and political groups associated with our "defined region" (the 20-some counties of Western North
Carolina) are both small and weak, relatively speaking, compared with those located elsewhere in the
state. Because of these two circumstances, our university may well have to "stretch" our concept of
"region" and become both willing and anxious to recognize and develop working and support
relationships with organizations that extend well beyond the geographical boundaries we generally
assume to define the limits of "our region."

John R. Adams, Management

I believe Dr. Winters is "on target" with his piece about the region. I especially think the Cherokee
campus needs more emphasis.

Davia Allen, Human Environmental Sciences

Oak Winters has written a challenging opinion piece on the importance of regional mission. One area
he raises is the need for interdisciplinary majors that respond to the region. This is just about
impossible to do at Western Carolina University. It took us about seven years to put together the
major in International Business because of its interdisciplinary focus. While I have heard the Vice
Chancellor and others discuss needed interdisciplinary majors, nothing is being done and who is
providing any leadership in this direction? With our current departmental structure, a group of faculty
that met to design an interdisciplinary major would get no support. Who are we kidding? Could we
see some leadership in this area? Congratulations on an interesting opinion piece but could we see
some "action" on some of these ideas after more meaningful discussion? For example a task force on
how interdisciplinary majors might be established might be in order. While we do need to realize the
best way to serve our region is quality education and what faculty do in the classroom, I did not see
anything in Oak Winters' opinion piece that would take us away from our primary mission at Western
Carolina university.

Gordon Mercer, Political Science and Public Affairs

I believe wholeheartedly with Oak Winters' assessment and his suggestions. One reason I remain in
Asheville is because I am still considered a "dignitary" there; I was in the lead car at the recent All
American City Dignitary parade. Yes, I think we should develop strong regional ties first, then worry
about attracting more kids from NYC, etc. I am hoping my ongoing novel Buck Gentry—which deals
with the mountain people of these counties—will further enhance this mode of thinking. I guess this
idea, or collection of ideas, could be summed up by saying we have a gold mine here, right under our
feet. It's time we realized it and acted accordingly.

Rick Boyer, English
Building a Sense of Community at WCU

How often have you had a student drop-by during office hours simply to chat? When was the last time you talked to a student in a setting other than the classroom? How many faculty do you know who are comfortable eating lunch with their undergraduate students? If you answer in the negative, you should know that it hasn't always been like this. I have fond memories of the hole-in-the-wall called the Townhouse (the present-day Subway). The Townhouse was the unofficial community center for WCU and the site of many faculty-student conversations over coffee or lunch. You may not share my nostalgia, but I believe the Townhouse had not been replaced in the present-day WCU and that our sense of community has deteriorated rather than improved since those Townhouse days.

I also believe that a sense of community is important in a university because teaching and learning thrive on stimulating conversation outside the classroom. You may talk occasionally to some of your students outside of class, maybe even to some of the other faculty, but that by itself does not make WCU an academic community where learning is vibrantly shared as a common possession and a form of enjoyment. In his address to the General Faculty last August, Chancellor Bardo observed that "most students who leave universities, leave for social reasons. . .[and] students stay in universities when. . .they feel that they are accepted, valued, and believed in. . .If they feel isolated and alone, they will find somewhere else to go to school or not go at all." According to the university mission statement, teaching and learning constitute the central mission at WCU but teaching and learning will only enliven the heart of an academic community when what goes on outside the classroom is as essential to a student's development as what goes on inside the classroom. It is the life outside of the classroom that will lead a student to either stay at WCU or leave it.

So how do you build a university community focused on learning that includes both students and faculty and expands beyond the boundaries of the classroom? I think a sense of community can develop through a common vision of learning as a process of discovery that essentially forces itself beyond the classroom. If we want to stimulate real learning in our students, we need to encourage them to discover knowledge for themselves and to understand that new insights are meaningless unless they are shared.

The Undergraduate Research Conference, for example, is certainly a step in the right direction in this matter, but could it not go farther to help create a stronger sense of community on campus? How about combining the Undergraduate Research Conference with the Graduate Student Research Symposium and designating a day in the spring when all classes are canceled and campus activities are genuinely focused on these presentations? At our research conferences
students are actively engaged in learning through discovery. Why not create an all-inclusive Student Research Conference with a genuinely high profile so that students could see that learning is unequivocally valued at WCU and that their teachers as well as their fellow students are genuinely interested in what they have discovered. If a Student Research Conference became a serious and respected event at WCU, student presenters would become models for other students, and faculty in turn would become more genuine facilitators in student learning outside the classroom.

A sense of community could also develop with communication across disciplines emphasizing how each discipline fits into the whole of society. If we want to stimulate a respect for real learning in our students, we need to demonstrate that ideas do not have boundaries. Interdepartmental seminars could show faculty sharing their disciplinary perspectives and the students might better understand connections between the diverse majors on campus. A series of seminars could be initiated to focus on a yearly topic. A different department could host the seminar each month and we could start with an environmental topic in light of the our new endowed professorship. For example, what do environmental issues look like from the perspective of sociology, economics, literature, industry, history, education, biology, nursing, and anthropology? The high visibility of such interdepartmental conversations would be living proof that the university is not a collection of isolated domains, which is what departments and the typical schedule of classes now conveys.

A sense of community could also develop with activities that stress the relevance of our world at WCU to the local community and beyond. If we want to stimulate a respect for learning in our students, we need to help them see the value of ideas in the context of everyday life. Alumni Day could involve a day of activities during which each department recognizes the success of former students by inviting them back to interact with current students. We have a Career Day which allows seniors to interview with potential employers, but students need to know what faces them in their chosen profession well before their final year of study. And who are they more likely to listen to than former students?

A sense of community can obviously not develop without communication. And certainly technology has possibilities for creating a virtual community on campus, but it will require more than equipping students and faculty with computers. Faculty will have to devote time and energy to using technology not only for instruction but for communication with students outside of class. Existing opportunities for electronic communication include 38 WCU newsgroups, but in browsing through the newsgroups, I found only four with over 10 comments during a two month period and these were primarily connected to a specific course. A message from a student on one of these newsgroups sums up the current use of this medium well: "hee hee hee. Is it just me or does it seem a little ironic that the only posts here in wcu.rec.weekends have nothing to do with recreation at WCU or the weekends? Not that anyone seems to read these newsgroups anyway." But communication doesn't have to be stimulated only by computers. How about by campus geography? A university square could provide a place for faculty and students to feel comfortable in casual conversation. Maybe we could block off traffic on University drive from Reid Gym (corner of Camp Lab Rd.) to the road past the stadium (corner of Forest Hills Dr.) and create a larger square around the UC and Dodson Cafeteria. Maybe we could recreate the comfortable and inviting atmosphere of the old Townhouse.
An academic community requires constant attention and commitment. For those of you working to broaden the doors of communication with students, keep the faith because whatever steps we take to make Western more inviting to students, we will have to address the issue of community sooner or later. Otherwise, what's the point of having students on campus; we might as well do all our classes on the web.

Randi Neff, Assistant Director, Upward Bound Math & Science Center

The opinions printed here belong solely to the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the editorial staff or of the Faculty Center. If you would like to respond, e-mail Nienhuis by the 8th of the month.
Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Response to "Building a Sense of Community at WCU," by Randi Neff, 2/1/98

While there were some large ideas in Randi Neff's piece on "Community Building," I have other thoughts about the subject:

1. Formal, structured, planned, scheduled activities, especially those created and run by faculty do little community building. Rather, a sense of community is built by continual, ongoing, informal interaction among faculty and students. Some interactions must be student generated, with faculty responding to and following student initiatives.

2. Faculty must "hang out" with students at least as much as they do with each other or discussions about community building are fruitless. This means more time at the UC and cafeterias and less time at the University Club.

3. Faculty and students must work together on projects, some of which should not be directed by faculty. We must have the courage and patience to work alongside students, or even to work for them. We must let them see us face problems and allow them to watch us seek solutions. This implies faculty are willing for students to see us make mistakes, that we can handle working with students smarter/quicker than we are at times. Community means we learn from each other.

4. The current faculty evaluation/reward/promotion climate makes spending a lot of time with students a risky proposition at best and foolhardy at worst.

5. WCU newsgroups are a classic example of how NOT to build faculty-student community. Instead of allowing students and faculty access to all existing newsgroups, someone decided to drastically censor newsgroup access. That decision left a handful of irrelevant, boring, little-read wastes of bandwidth. Our faculty and students must interact within a "real world" environment, not a sanitized, "best of all possible worlds" illusion that inhibits meaningful communication.

6. To build community, we must begin acknowledging our students as ADULTS, not children. Adults decide what to read for themselves and discuss what they choose to discuss, even if it may not always be what parents, faculty, administrators, trustees, taxpayers, and legislators would choose.

7. Faculty must never penalize students for their participation in the "community" by censoring their thoughts or punishing them for unpopular, or even dumb, ideas.

8. Faculty must be willing to share honest thoughts with students, not textbook extracts or politically correct dogma. Do we have the courage to open up with students? Dare we allow our students to see our tears and anger?

John Moore, Communication and Theatre Arts
A Defense of English

"poetry makes nothing happen"

W.H. Auden, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats"

As we know, the general education committee has been working on a proposal to change the way our freshmen and sophomores learn about the world that lies beyond their majors. Among other changes, the committee suggests replacing the second freshman composition course with a 300-level writing course in the discipline, and a subcommittee has designed a “Perspectives” area that contains Social Sciences (6 hours), Natural Sciences (6-7 hours), Humanities (3 hours), Fine and Performing Arts (3 hours), History (3 hours), and Comparative Cultures (3 hours). I admire the committee’s work, and I applaud its emphasis on learning communities that help students to make connections between different disciplines’ ways of thinking. But I worry about the shrinking place of composition and literature in this new curriculum. The proposed curriculum mentions neither a literature nor a foreign language requirement.

As a younger person on the tenure track, I should not be called old-fashioned, even if some think I am only guarding my job. I grant that no claim is wholly disinterested. But Social Sciences and Natural Sciences are well represented in the Perspectives section not only because members of that subcommittee were defending their interests, but because they had sufficient understanding of the importance of those disciplines in general education. I want to suggest that the committee, which has rightly shown us how writing within disciplines aids active learning and comprehension, has yet misunderstood the kind of learning that goes on in our current composition courses, English 101 and 102. Since those now teaching composition and literature are not represented on the committee, such a misunderstanding may be inevitable.

The minutes of November 24, 1997, summarize the question as the committee sees it: "Basic mechanics should be offered in English 101, but beyond that we want them to really develop writing skills appropriate to their major (linked to content, not just process)." Such a link is important, and I do not dispute the need for it. But freshman composition is not about "basic mechanics," though it may distress many teachers to hear it. Recent composition theory argues that students wish to learn mechanics only when they learn to take pride in their own writing. Despite their lower SAT scores, our freshmen usually know their mechanics; they simply do not value them.

In English 101, students learn to write about their own experiences and to determine more confidently how and to whom they will address them. In this way, they gain a stake in their own
writing. In English 102, on the other hand, students learn the basic lessons of submission to the
gods of research, format, and citation--lessons they will need for college and the workplace.
Which of these should be sacrificed in this new curriculum? Should the creative work of 101 be
relegated to the Freshman seminar, where it becomes subordinated to instilling "a sense of place"
and "a sense of community"? Will faculty in the several disciplines that absorb 102 teach the
lessons of finding and documenting sources in the junior year? Should we tell students who are
already struggling that they should trust their voice but follow instructions, all in the same
semester?

This proposal, should it become policy, can also hurt our enrollment. Many of our students
come to Western planning to transfer to another UNC institution. Many transfer here from other
UNC institutions, and many complete their general education courses at the community college
level. The Comprehensive Articulation Agreement, which governs transfers between two-year
and four-year colleges, specifies that students must have 6 hours of composition, 12 hours of
humanities and fine arts (of which one must be a literature course), 12 hours of social and
behavioral sciences, and 14 hours of natural sciences and mathematics. Western already presents
problems for transferring students because we do not allow students to substitute courses
required for the major for general education courses in the same discipline. The general
education curriculum that is being proposed would make transfers from Western less common,
since those students would have to pick up so many more general education requirements at their
new school. They might opt to stay on here, then, but they are as likely to enroll in the first place
in a school that abides by the Comprehensive Articulation agreement (UNCC, East Carolina,
Fayetteville State, NC Central, NC State, Winston Salem State, Pembroke, Elizabeth City State,
UNCA, Appalachian State, UNCW, and UNCC all require six hours of freshman composition,
and most of these have a literature requirement). Students transferring in would have similar
problems. We ought to be working to make transferring easier, not harder.

Students ought to learn the lessons of coherence and grace in all disciplines. But all our faculty
are not trained to teach them, nor have they always taught them in the past. Making freshman
composition courses the hub of freshman learning communities, instead of replacing composition
with the freshman seminar, would serve several purposes: English teachers could share strategies
for effective writing with other teachers, who could bring those strategies back to their own
disciplines; English teachers could learn how to integrate the content of other disciplines into their
writing courses; and students and teachers could share ideas and make connections between the
major disciplines. We could achieve many of the general education committee's pedagogical goals
without tying knots in FTE requirements, without subordinating composition's ability to foster
intellect to its necessary but essentially cosmetic function, and without discouraging transferring
students. And we would go a long way toward building a real writing across the curriculum
program, one in which every teacher gives the message that grammar and coherence are part of
life, not just English class.

More than practical considerations are at stake, however. We have a chance to say now what
education is and what it ought to be. The fate of composition, like the fate of humanities in the
general education curriculum (three hours in the new proposal), depends on our believing that all
learning is not about specialty. Life is not only about work, and general education should not
exist only to provide a portfolio of marketable skills. We also want a curriculum and a university
that give our students a look into the richer world of understatement, intimation, and irony, to
free some who do not even read for pleasure from what Wallace Stevens has called "a mind of winter" ("The Snow Man"). As faculty, we are here because we saw that world. Because I fell in love with this university and hoped to build a life here, I want Western to say that students who have never read literature in college have not received the education they deserve.

We know that English can be useful. Piaget tells us that learning involves "de-centering." "We achieve de-centering by adapting ourselves to things and people outside ourselves and by adopting points of view initially foreign to us, as the anonymous narrator does with his single, dual, and multiple points of view" (summarized in Moffett and McElheny's Points of View: An Anthology of Short Stories (1966), p. 572). But we mistake the matter when we justify any curriculum by its use. Like all arts, literature fuels the imagination; like all humanities, it enlarges our sympathies with what Stevens calls "the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." We ought to know the market and the mind too. We ought to teach real-world skills and computer languages. But as educated people, we have learned the quieter accents of pleasure, pity, and belief--and our students need that language.

Mary Adams, English
Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "A Defense of English," by Mary Adams, 3/1/98

The General Education Review Committee welcomes Mary Adams' "A Defense of English" in the March 1 Faculty Forum. Her argument identifies several of the important issues from our draft proposal for General Education, specifically those concerning the composition requirement and the humanities requirement. There are others, the Freshman seminar and the role of learning communities to name a few. Mary's essay should help to promote the discussion of the general education program proposal in the weeks and months ahead. The proposal is still very much under development, and input from all constituencies and individuals of the University is essential. The General Education Review Committee directs your attention to our letter of February 26 and the draft proposal attached to it which explain where we are in our work. Further discussion opportunities will include a series of open hearings beginning after Spring Break, and a University Forum that will conclude the semester's deliberations. The development process will continue into next Fall semester, and the Committee will welcome thoughtful input from throughout the University community.

Curtis Wood, for the General Education Review Committee

Mary Adams makes several definite points that we all need to consider in any General Education revision. The Committee must weigh these carefully before revamping a curriculum that puts our students out of step with other state institutions or any higher learning institution for that matter. We need only recall that we tried the Thinking, Reasoning, and Expressing course series for a number of years only to find they would not transfer to other institutions nor were there many courses that would fit this category and transfer into ours. In this case, it was not a poor idea but rather it was a simple practical matter of credit approval. Will we go down the same path with a new curriculum?

Dan Pittillo, Biology

Mary has many good points concerning the development of writing abilities of our students. I wholeheartedly agree with her perspective that one semester of composition is not nearly enough for our students. I also would tend to think that her points about the impact of the composition of the committee are probably true to some extent. These issues should not, however, overshadow the obvious hard work that went into the development of the proposal. As Mary points out, the proposal has many great ideas and is the work of many dedicated, insightful colleagues.

I think that the primary issue of consideration is not the number of semesters of composition that students have but the extent to which writing is emphasized in ALL classes, both in general education and within majors. I do not teach general education classes but require my undergraduate students to write at least 3 papers each semester. Most are dismayed by how "mean" I am in grading. I have high expectations of them, and by the end of the semester I usually can see a clear improvement in their writing.

The time it takes to grade these papers is time well spent, though this time clearly takes away from other, perhaps more "rewarded" activities, such as research or service activities. I, however, like many of my colleagues, realize that this time giving students feedback on their writing will, in the long run, prove to be the best use of this time.

Thus, I believe the issue to be not one of number of courses taken with a composition title, but the extent to which composition is emphasized in ALL classes. I would like to see much more writing and much less emphasis on tests throughout the university. I believe that students learn much more through writing, feedback, and perhaps re-writing than they are likely to learn by studying and taking tests. To the extent that we can incorporate this writing emphasis into ALL classes at WCU is the extent to which our students, and ultimately us, will benefit.

Rob Routhieaux, Management

Let the church (the WCU community) say Amen! Alfred Wiggins, Communication & Theatre Arts

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Responses to "A Defense of English,"
by Mary Adams, 3/1/98, continued

Mary Adams raises a very important point—one that I'd like to phrase even more provocatively: the true purpose of a college education is not to develop "marketable skills" but to develop the mind and spirit. We should not be in the business of training potential "employee product" but of stimulating human beings (our students and ourselves) to think and feel deeply about what it means to be human. We must do this not only in our (too often) narrowly identified disciplines, but in everything we do. Because good thinking is ultimately inseparable from good writing, the writing courses should be, as Mary suggests, the very core of our general education curriculum.

Will Peebles, Music

I agree strongly with the position that the second semester freshman course in research documentation should be retained in the new General Education curriculum. It is essential that students have the skills to do research papers if we are to meet the objectives of General Education in perspectives courses, and we cannot wait until students are in the middle of their majors to teach those skills. Nor should instructors in courses in the majors have to spend time on teaching those skills. I especially like the idea of combining the research documentation course with a perspectives course in a learning community. That would help both instructors convey to their students the importance of the form and content of a research paper—and of the library resource skills that lie behind it.

Ed Price, Anthropology and Sociology

We the undersigned members of the Art Department can only deplore with Mary Adams any kind of reduction in the development of general compositional skills. Over the last few years one of the most alarming and noteworthy aspects of student performance has been their increased difficulty in expressing their thoughts in writing. Clearly not less but more training in writing is needed. Learning a specific vocational vocabulary is no substitute for discovering how to put words and ideas together in every aspect of life, so that meaningful communication between individuals remains within the province of a university education. Otherwise, to quote recent remarks by William Sloane Coffin, "The humanities don't humanize. They're cultural icing on an economic cake."

Joan Byrd, Robert Godfrey, Cathy Griffin, Jon Jicha, Marya Roland, James Thompson, Art

I agree with Adams. But, something has got to change from the way we have taught English in the past, if my current crop of Seniors is any indication of English 101 basic mechanics.

I require written laboratory reports and deduct for obvious errors of grammar and spelling. I usually end up deducting more points for English 101 than I do for technical content.

If we are going to do English 101 let us do it right and quit passing on illiterates to the rest of the University. I am tired of trying to fix the English departments' mistakes.

Kenneth Ayala, Industrial & Engineering Technology

Among the excellent points Mary Adams makes, I agree that the Comprehensive Articulation Agreement would make it suicide for WCU to cut freshman composition to 3 hrs. and to remove the literature requirement. Beyond this, I join her in applauding most of what the General Education Review Committee has proposed: a freshmen seminar can be valuable (how better to clearly communicate to first-year students the "idea of the university"?) and to require upper level writing courses in the student's discipline (students need further grounding in the conventions of good writing and correct documentation in their fields). It must be stressed, however, that mechanics of good writing properly belong in most classes taught at WCU—not only in Engl 101. As Dr. Adams so aptly puts it, "Students ought to learn the lessons of coherence and grace in all disciplines." The newly thought-out coordinated General Education program can help to make this possible—IF we do not sacrifice writing taught by trained faculty and make the error we did in the 1970s with foreign language and declare literature "unnecessary."

Steve Eberly, English
Could Newsgroups Help?

"WCU newsgroups are a classic example of how NOT to build faculty-student community. Instead of allowing students and faculty access to all existing newsgroups, someone decided to drastically censor newsgroup access. That decision left a handful of irrelevant, boring, little-read wastes of bandwidth. Our faculty and students must interact within a 'real world' environment, not a sanitized, 'best of all possible worlds' illusion that inhibits meaningful communication."--John Moore

John Moore's response in the February 15 issue of notes & quotes asserts that local newsgroups are not a good way to build a stronger sense of community between faculty and students at Western. I believe that he is wrong, but maybe we should start by making sure everyone understands what newsgroups are.

Newsgroups are an Internet phenomenon that enables people with computers to communicate with one another on particular subjects. For example, if you are interested in Shakespeare's sonnets or the recreational use of guns, somewhere on the Internet there is an international discussion going on right now, and tonight you can join it. You can log on, see what other people are concerned about, see what opinions and queries have been posted, see how others have answered, post an answer yourself, or pose your own opinions or questions. People also publish essays, even manifestos, in newsgroups, and everyone is invited to join in the discussion. Some newsgroups are "moderated," where the articles are first sent to an editor for approval before appearing in the newsgroup. Other newsgroups are unmonitored and, as one might expect, contain more to wade through in order to get to the pearls of wisdom.

National and international newsgroups multiply daily and Western faculty and students have access to much of it through the WCU Internet. About 9,000 newsgroups now exist throughout the world, and one can have access from WCU, at the time of this writing, to 7,168, or about 80%, of those newsgroups. More are added daily. This hardly sounds like censoring of newsgroup access. Using any Netscape 3 version, simply pull down from the top menu "Netscape News," go to File and pull down "Add Newsgroup," and you will be invited to type in the name of a newsgroup you can join. To find the names of newsgroups, you can search www.dejanews.com and find more newsgroup names than you can handle. For Netscape 4 versions, the procedure is quite different, but you can use the Help page or contact me for instructions.

We have approximately 4.5 gigabytes of disk space for use by our campus users—not quite enough to carry absolutely everything. But of that space, about 1/2 to 3/4 is usually full—sometimes more and sometimes less. By reducing the expire time (the time before posted messages are removed to free space) to 1-2 days, we could perhaps carry more groups; however, that would give our community only those 1-2 days to read new messages. Currently, messages are expired after 4-5 days (and sometimes this number is increased, based on traffic). The local newsgroups are expired after 180 days.
To access local newsgroups, one uses Netscape to get to the WCU home page (www.wcu.edu). Then one clicks on Centers, goes to Computer Center, clicks on Resources, and one finally sees a list of WCU Newsgroups. These are the newsgroups that John considers irrelevant to faculty-student interaction. One newsgroup (wcu.rec.weekends) discusses what to do around here for entertainment on weekends. Another provides a clearing house for humor. Another talks about career opportunities. Another provides help with the Internet or with general computer problems. The Task Force on University Governance has a discussion group, as does the General Education Review Committee. There's also a newsgroup for departmental or interdepartmental discussions, newsgroups set up for particular courses, and there's even a newsgroup (wcu.config) to discuss what should be added to the list of WCU newsgroups. Obviously, the opportunities for meaningful newsgroup experiences exist at WCU.

The question of whether or not these opportunities are used is something else. The computer and the Internet are simply tools. If people choose not to use them, it's like people not realizing that there's a county fair in the town around the bend or like recalcitrant farmers insisting on the old mule and a plow rather than using a John Deere to make the soil fit for crops. Imagine an interest in local newsgroups that would create and sustain a newsgroup for students who were dissatisfied with WCU and were looking to transfer. Faculty and other students could perhaps intervene, solve problems, and help stem the tide of poor retention that threatens WCU's fiscal and academic health.

I have tried for over two years to get the campus community involved in local newsgroups but seem to have failed, considering the precious small traffic I see in the WCU groups. I've no idea how many, if any, of our campus community use the other non-WCU groups. However, I'd certainly love to share with anyone who is interested how much I've learned in my own field by reading and participating in newsgroups—even in the days before we had our own server. They've even been useful to me on a personal level. Considering the sheer volume of what we do carry, I feel certain each person on our campus (students, staff and faculty) can find several groups that are useful both professionally and personally. And, with Netscape's new technology, finding groups to each person's liking has become a very simple task.

If the interchange of ideas among a reasonably well-mixed cross-section of the world's population is a good thing in general, then newsgroups are one way to get involved. Spend 30-60 minutes one day looking through some of the newsgroups our campus carries (both wcu and worldwide groups). After looking around, think about how they might be useful in class or elsewhere in your life. Not everyone will find the newsgroups useful, but everyone should have access to them in order to decide. I'd also suggest attending the Computer Implementation Workshops given by the Faculty Center; Chris Martin, Laura Chapman, Bob Orr, and Beth Leftwich are including a brief segment on the use of newsgroups in "Netscape, the Web, and E-Mail."

I want to be sure that Mr. Moore's editorial doesn't cause the ship to sink entirely, as I remember being a student and would have loved to have such an avenue to learn, meet people, and discuss ideas outside of class. Please don't take Mr. Moore's comments on newsgroups as absolute. See for yourself and (gulp) call me if you have difficulty in finding newsgroups (or look at http://www.wcu.edu/cc/infosheets/news.html for basic help). Notice that I'm the primary poster to wcu.announce, although I wish I weren't. See for yourself. At WCU, newsgroups are alive!

Patti Johnson, Computer Center

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Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

EXCERPTS from responses to "Could Newsgroups Help?"
by Patti Johnson, 4/1/98

EDITOR’S NOTE: We are pleased that responses to Patti Johnson fill five pages, but, to conserve our printing budget (and a few trees) and expedite your reading, we are printing excerpts. The full text of all responses is available upon request.

My citation of WCU newsgroups as examples of how NOT to build a faculty-student community was the fifth point in my original list. Before taking a shot at newsgroups, I emptied both barrels at "formal, structured, scheduled activities, especially those created and run by faculty." I then called for faculty and students to work together on projects, some of which should not be directed by faculty. I also maintained that we must begin to treat students as ADULTS who are perfectly able to read and discuss what they choose, whether faculty like student choices or not.

Rather than "selling" and promoting newsgroups, which she says have not worked well, Johnson might look into providing free, off-campus Internet access to all WCU students, as Southwestern Community College is doing. She might also look into providing that to faculty. We would all appreciate saving the $15-20 per month we now must spend for Internet access. It might encourage more extensive communication among students and faculty.

John Moore, Communications and Theatre Arts

I think [newsgroups] are very powerful and I attempted to start one of my own to help teachers share their problems and look for solutions.

I think there are several problems with regard to using newsgroups. First people have to be knowledgeable about the group or be willing to search for it. Second, they need to be willing to communicate through the group. They obviously need to have access to a wired computer and mostly they need to have time. People would most likely prefer to have a face-to-face encounter to discuss whatever the topic of the newsgroup because they can do two things: communicate and have a social encounter. Newsgroup use doesn’t allow for the second, so most people, given the choice, would probably rather meet in person. But this doesn’t reduce the power or potential of newsgroups. Like Patti, I think they have much to offer and I hope to use them more in my own work.

David Westling, Human Services

A newsgroup is as interesting as the people who participate in it, and if nobody knows it's there, it's likely to be pretty dull. If a message is posted in a forest and nobody reads it, does it exist?

The local newsgroups Patti described are languishing because nobody knows about them. They're a POTENTIAL but underutilized resource. You can provide just the information everybody needs on a "campus events" group, but if nobody's reading it, nobody knows. You can post a fascinating and provocative question for discussion, and if nobody reads it or answers it, the discussion doesn’t happen.

But these newsgroups could be exactly the kind of thing we’re talking about in our "how do we use technology to enhance education?" discussions: a technological tool to keep students, faculty, and staff in touch, discussing intellectual (technical, cultural, social, recreational, other) topics with each other, with local experts, and with the outside world. They have an obvious and natural place as a communications tool in learning communities, particularly the cross-discipline types of learning communities some of us are talking about. If we didn’t already have them, we’d need to invent them!

Allen Moore, Biology
Responses to "Could Newsgroups Help?"
by Patti Johnson, 4/1/98, continued

John Moore's comments on newsgroups and Patti Johnson's reply to him leave me wondering what sort of community can be built within newsgroups. I have used newsgroups for 8 years and found very little community there. It may be the community of the city center, rather than that of the town square, but listserves are much more conducive to any sort of community feeling.

I view newsgroups as similar to bookstores: you can choose whether to enter, and when to visit, and decide which sections you want to browse. Listserves are more like mail: sometimes full of junk mail, sometimes more useful and more similar to professional journals. I recommend "dejanews" (www.dejanews.com) to anyone interested in exploring the real value of newsgroups. I would be happy to help anyone who is interested in exploring this resource further.

Bob Strauss, Hunter Library and Dept. Of Math & CS

Patti Johnson's reply to John Moore on newsgroups was a refreshingly informative and compelling piece. I have three points of reaction.

First, Patti points out that faculty who are concerned can read in a newsgroup students' reasons for wanting to transfer to other schools. A meaningful discussion and exchange on this issue would be both challenging to faculty and well worthwhile. I've felt long and strongly that students ought to better recognize the reasons for staying at WCU--our campus' unique values--but I'm torn between thinking, "It IS their decision, and you're rather biased, aren't you?" and having little I could offer in the way of concrete reasons besides the obvious: WCU offers more student-faculty contact opportunities, strong student support, and a more beautiful environment (students who don't value increased contact with faculty, don't particularly want to be "supported," and for whom an urban mall is the height of beauty are not likely to be swayed by these reasons!)

Second, Patti points out that a small but steady involvement by faculty might have a solid effect on increasing student-faculty communications, and hence might increase retention. Her suggestion that each of us spend 30 to 60 minutes a week reading and responding in a student newsgroup seems highly feasible. Many of us are already trying to get students to use electronic media to exchange ideas or carry out tasks within OUR agendas (class work, learning-enhancement discussions, etc.); how better to put our commitment to students on the line than to spend some time in a newsgroup focusing on THEIR needs and views. (True, I personally don't find myself as interested in much of what seems to thrill students as I am in W. B. Yeats or literature in general; but I WOULD like to know more about student values and perceptions on life. Perhaps my involvement a newsgroup would give me this added insight and help me save a student for WCU at the same time.)

Third, Patti points out that the Faculty Center is providing workshops including the use of newsgroups. This, I think, offers all of us an opportunity to see what CAN be done to enhance our courses and campus life in general (and to avoid some of the most obvious pitfalls, which I assume motivated John Moore's statements about waste of time and effort in the first place).

Patti rightly points out that newsgroups are merely tools, and can be unused, misused, or used effectively--just as a hammer might. Let's see if a number of us can learn to use newsgroups to enhance communication with our students both about education and values of WCU life on the one hand, and about student concerns and worries on the other. We may be able to build something really worthwhile with such tools.

Steve Eberly, English
The Faculty Forum, Ten Years After

Remember October, 1988? Vol. 1, No. 1 of the Faculty Forum. "A Call for Opinions!" In that premiere issue, we said that we sought to "raise the energy level of the dialogue on campus" and "to spark a lively dialogue about college teaching." Our goal was to encourage our own faculty to raise crucial issues that might lead to significant changes in our campus community. We now have a collection of *80 opinion pieces on file, and some of our colleagues who were here prior to 1988 say that this steady stream of provocative, insightful articles has indeed made a difference. Remember these?

"Encouraging Student Risk-Taking By Balancing Challenge and Support"
by Bruce Henderson, February, 1990

"One of the trickiest aspects of teaching is finding that precarious balance between adequately challenging students and providing sufficient support so that students will take exploratory risks. But how well do we as teachers provide a responsive, 'secure base' for risky learning?"

"Teaching Has Always Been #1: A Dean's Viewpoint"
by Cliff Lovin, December, 1990

"Teaching is Dead Last, or Worse: A Faculty Viewpoint"
by Bill Kane, February, 1991

"Remus Singularis in Aqua"
by Phil Wade, March, 1992

"We read the Faculty Forum to learn what our colleagues are doing individually to improve academic standards. And again one is reminded of the boat with only one oar in the water. Unfortunately, academic standards cannot be raised by faculty members alone. The endeavor requires a deliberate university-wide policy. Our present plight, I think, is an unhappy corollary of WCU's two-decade failure to heed Wade's Law which, with apologies to Thomas Gresham, I will state once more: bad students drive out good students and, ultimately, even bad students. They don't want to be seen in each other's company."

*You can find past issues of the Faculty Forum on the Faculty Center home page: from the WCU homepage your path is Centers, Faculty Center, either Frames or No Frames, and Publications*
"The Web: The Revolution Is Here; Let's Join Today"
by Bob Houghton, February, 1995

"What should the university do now? Provide more networked seats. There are only 12 public access workstations on our campus, all in the Killian Lab. Do more to encourage and help students obtain their own workstations. Network classrooms and provide projection equipment for whole class activities to make this incredible new system visible. Reward risk and innovation with new technologies in the tenure and promotion process. Develop a team to assist the creation of local call access to our Western mountain communities. We must learn and lead."

Teaching Awards: A Modest Proposal
by Hal Herzog, November, 1996

"We can hold what amounts to a playoff series. Each contestant will have 15 minutes to demonstrate his or her pedagogical skill. As in Olympic figure skating, a panel of judges will rate each performance on a 10 point scale. The departmental teach-off winners will go on to the college level. The winners from each college will then compete in a grand event to be held each year during half-time at the WCU-ASU football game. The specter of the best teachers at the university duking it out over a lifetime of financial security would be just the sort of public acknowledgment of good teaching that state legislators love. Personally, I favor this approach. I have a lecture on the evolution of the sexual orgasm that will knock their socks off."

The Plight of Part-Time Instructors: Two Similar Experiences
by Linda Kinnear and Michael Waters, November, 1997

"After ten years of teaching and service, I cannot reconcile my commitment with having no job security, health benefits, retirement, or any hope for advancement. Likewise, I cannot help but wonder where our General Education program will be academically and technologically if we continue on the course of considering faculty expendable. Any development of faculty commitment must first consider the value the institution places on those doing the teaching. How we treat our least empowered faculty speaks loudly of Western's commitment to teaching."

For the dialogue of the Faculty Forum to solidify our sense of ourselves and to alter what needs changing, you must believe that your voice in the Faculty Forum could make a real difference. You also need to trust that we don't have to agree with your point of view. In fact, we believe that a healthy academic community thrives on constructive disagreement and the free exchange of ideas and opinions. We encourage Forum pieces that will arouse opposition so the resulting debate can uncover the best wisdom that a community of scholars can generate. There are many in-house publications across the country that come out of faculty development centers and focus on teaching, but ours is singular in that it focuses on feedback, on an exchange of ideas and different points of view. In order to sustain the Faculty Forum for another decade, we need you, this summer, to decide what needs to be said to make WCU a more vital teaching and learning environment.

_Terry Nienhuis, Editor, Faculty Forum_