

# Faculty Forum

## Volume 13, Numbers 1-8 and Responses (2000-2001)

### Table of Contents

#### Number 1

The Faculty's Role in Student Retention

*Rob Routhieaux, Management*

#### Number 1, Responses

Responses to Volume 13, Number 1

#### Number 2

Cullowhee: A Place Apart From the Madding Crowd?

*April Lewandowski, English*

#### Number 2, Responses

Responses to Volume 13, Number 2

#### Number 3

The Faculty's Role: To Govern or Advise?

*Casey Hurley, Faculty Chair*

#### Number 4

Learning Communities: Are They Worth the Investment?

*Millie Abel, Psychology, and Malcolm Abel, Business Administration, Law, and Marketing*

#### Number 4, Responses

Responses to Volume 13, Number 4

#### Number 5

An Alternative to Program Deletion

*Duane Davis, Criminal Justice*

#### Number 5, Responses

Responses to Volume 13, Number 5

#### Number 6

Learning Communities: Chaos or Cooperation?

*Newt Smith, English*

#### Number 6, Responses

Responses to Volume 13, Number 6

Number 7

Student Learning Is a Faculty Problem

*Bill Kane and Terry Kinnear, Management*

Number 7, Responses

Responses to Volume 13, Number 7

Number 8

Students As Clients

*John W. Moore, Communication and Theatre Arts*

Number 8, Responses

Responses to Volume 13, Number 8



# Faculty Forum

*From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning*

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 13, No. 1

September 1, 2000

## **The Faculty's Role in Student Retention**

Over the past few years, WCU has made many changes to address student retention. We have changed the processes by which we recruit and orient students, provided more things to do on campus (and in the surrounding community), looked into new advising methods and models, created learning communities and more focused residential arrangements, and tried a myriad of other initiatives. All of these efforts are admirable and well intentioned, but they are only small pieces in the complex retention puzzle. So what's missing? I suspect it is faculty ownership and acceptance of responsibility for the problem.

Let's not kid ourselves. Our students leave because **WE** do not motivate them enough to stay. While we may prefer to place the blame on factors beyond our control, we must accept the fact that student retention is primarily dependent on faculty actions (or inaction) toward students. Efforts to improve retention rates will only "succeed" to the extent that **WE** are willing to do some critical self-analysis and change some of our behaviors.

So, what do we, as faculty, need to do? No single strategy is likely to have much impact. True impact will come from coordinated efforts and fundamental shifts in how we approach our jobs and "how we do things" in general. Here are some of the things I have gleaned from discussions with students (some who have stayed, some who have not):

- Make sure classes, especially introductory classes, are **NOT** like high school classes. In other words, make the work more meaningful and applied. It only takes one or two "standard lecture and test-based classes" to convince new students that WCU is just an extension of high school.
- Take attendance as a means for tracking student interest and potential problems, not as a means for "policing" students. Face it, students skip class because they don't see value in attending. Making attendance "mandatory" is misguided, misdirected, and totally ineffective--and likely to generate even more resistance (which we know limits learning and development).
- Follow up on perceived disinterest or "problems" in students. Sure, we can always write this off as "their responsibility"--but doing so is only denying our role in the process. I have been amazed at the impact of approaching students who have missed two consecutive classes by inquiring "Is everything OK? I noticed you missed class the last couple of days." Sure, discuss the consequences of such absences, but try to focus on core issues, like motivation.
- Don't make scheduling the main focus of advising sessions. Sure, some students need help learning our system and doing some planning, but emphasis on scheduling during advising creates dependence and replaces the individual connections needed for good advising. Advising should focus on student development issues.
- Provide students with assignments and activities that are engaging and of personal interest. The quality of student work is directly affected by their interest in doing the assignment. Let them customize their work to their lives. We should never pass judgement or restrict the



student's choice of context. Assigning all students the same paper, with the same focus on the same topic, is as boring for them to write as it is for us to read.

All students come to college with preconceived notions about what college will be like. Most expect the work to be more challenging than high school, but they also expect that these heightened expectations will be accompanied by increased support. When the support does not follow, students become frustrated and burned out on school, and look elsewhere to satisfy their needs. By this point, we have missed the opportunity to make a good impression, and essentially failed that student (student "failure" is as much a reflection of us as it is of them).

Improving student retention will entail some infringement upon faculty autonomy. As a result, such changes may be labeled as "threats to faculty freedom" or as "violations" of other principles. In other words, we always seem to come up with what we believe are "good reasons" for maintaining the status quo. Thus, addressing these deep-rooted resistors to change will require significant structural and cultural shifts on campus. Some potential focus points for such structural and cultural shifts include:

- Only our most dynamic and student-focused faculty should teach introductory courses. While this may include some of our adjuncts (many are excellent teachers and scholars), we need to be aware of the underlying messages sent to students who view their teacher as a "part-timer."
- We need to move away from our overemphasis on "course releases" for faculty. It seems that every time faculty take on new responsibilities (administrative, usually), we reduce their time in the classroom as compensation. While this may be appropriate at times and with certain faculty, any decision to reduce teaching load sends a message to students and others that "other things" are more important than student education.
- We need to find more and better ways to encourage faculty to adopt teaching methods that better parallel our students' interests and particular needs. We expect our students to be flexible and creative. We must exhibit these same characteristics. Part of this is making "class visits" by colleagues more than just "a check in the square."
- We need to identify and take action with faculty who are notorious for not caring, not being helpful, or not being flexible or considerate of student concerns and issues. Clearly, this is a tough issue--but our persistent and pervasive culture of conflict avoidance breeds alienation and cynicism, and has subtle but insidiously detrimental impact on our students. If student learning is really the hallmark of this institution, as stated in our mission and other documents, we must be willing to take action when faculty are not helping fulfill this mission. Call it whatever you'd like, but faculty must be more accountable for their actions or inaction.
- We need to get away from the "all faculty as advisors" model. We do a huge disservice to our students when we assign them to an advisor who lacks the knowledge, skills, or interest to do the job well. Some of us are good advisors, others are good at administrative work, and others have talents in other areas. We should focus our attention where we can do the most good.

Students want the same things we want: to be valued, respected, and understood as INDIVIDUALS. We must show them that we see them as more than names and numbers on a grade sheet and FTE's. I am not suggesting that we "spoon feed" them or cater to their every whim. Let's just make sure our high expectations are matched by our encouragement and support.

### ***Rob Routhieaux, Management***

*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 "The Faculty's Role in Student Retention," by Rob Routhieaux, 9/1/00

Rob, I agree with you completely.

*Clarissa Fisher, Library*

\* \* \*

While I agree with many (but not all) of Rob's suggestions for improving our teaching, I am profoundly dubious that faculty are the driving force behind WCU's poor retention rate or that we can be the ones to solve the problem. As I think back to my undergraduate years, I remember how utterly peripheral my professors were to my life and sense of well-being. In order of importance, I cared about my circle of friends (and especially my love life), my family back at home (this would have jumped to #1 had there been any problems at home), the subjects I was studying, and lastly and definitely least, my professors. I had some excellent professors and some lousy ones but it boggles my mind to think it ever would have occurred to me to leave the university because of some twit of a professor.

Last time I asked the administration if it had any idea why students left (this was last year), I was told no, they had no clue. What a surprise to discover this year that it's all our fault. Frank Prochaska said (last year) that WCU has tried to discover why students leave but keeps getting "bogus" answers like "My girlfriend is at another institution." Folks, that doesn't sound bogus to me. It sounds exactly like my priorities when I was 18 and 19.

If the administration continues to think our students are lying about why they leave (boy, there's a respectful attitude toward our students), then why don't they look into where students go and what they do after leaving WCU. If they are all transferring immediately to another school much like WCU, that means something different than if they sit at home and work in the service industry or join the military.

One last point: yes, there are some terrible teachers and some horrible teaching here at WCU. We could probably all name the culprits. Hopefully post-tenure review should embolden us to do so and to insist that these people shape up or ship out. By and large, however, I believe that the majority of professors—while not all using the same methods or style—are quite competent, and are not responsible for driving our students away.

*Gael Graham, History*

\* \* \*

While I agree with many of Rob's suggestions, I am concerned with the growing tendency to blame the faculty for WCU's freshman retention problem. Data from the Institutional Profiles, published annually by the UNC Board of Governors, sheds considerable light on the sources of our retention woes. The results are surprising.

Let's, as they say in the College of Business, "run the numbers." Among the nine non-minority universities, two factors are highly related to freshman retention--in a statistical sense. The first is the proportion of freshman ranked in the bottom half of their high school classes, which is inversely related to retention rates. Within the UNC system, the universities with the highest retention rates have the lowest proportion of freshmen ranked in the bottom half of their senior class. Conversely, the institutions with the lowest retention rates have the highest proportion of freshmen from the lower half of their senior class (for those with a penchant for statistics, the Pearson correlation coefficient between freshman retention rate and proportion of low ranking students at the nine schools is an impressive -.80). The proportion of low ranking students at WCU (about 37% in 1998) is far higher than at any other non-minority university in our system. For example, the proportion of bottom half

- - -Continue - - -

## Responses to "The Faculty's Role in Student Retention," by Rob Routhieaux, 9/1/00

freshmen at WCU in 1998 was about 25 times higher than that of Chapel Hill or UNC-A (each at 1.4%), nearly 5 times higher than at App State (8%), and over twice as high as ECU (16%). Surprisingly, despite a modest increase in the average SAT score of entering students, the proportion of WCU freshmen in the lower half of their senior class classes actually increased every year between 1994 and 1998.

A second variable which predicts retention differences among UNC schools is the average SAT score of the freshman class. As expected, the universities with the highest SAT scores (Chapel Hill and NC State) have the highest retention rates, those with mid-level SATs (App State and UNC-W) have moderate retention rates, and those with the lowest SATs have the lowest retention rates. I was not prepared, however, for the strength of this relationship. In 1998, the Pearson Correlation between retention rates at the various schools and mean freshman SAT was an astounding .90. This means that over 80% of the differences between retention rates among UNC schools is a function of the average SAT scores of the freshman class.

As Rob said, "Let's not kid ourselves." The fact is that retention among the non-minority UNC system schools is highly related to student variables and weakly, if at all, to faculty attributes. There is no reason to suspect that the faculty at WCU are any less freshman-friendly than our colleagues at UNC-A or East Carolina. And there is every reason to think that WCU provides a more supportive educational environment than Chapel Hill and NC State. The Research I schools have highest retention rates in the state while probably at the same time having the fewest faculty who take daily attendance, the lowest proportion of teachers who know their students' names, and the highest number of freshman classes taught by graduate students for whom English is a second language.

This is not to suggest that we can blow off our low retention rates. Many of Rob's suggestions are on the mark—our best professors should teach freshman courses and we do have a responsibility to make our courses rigorous and engaging. I take issue, however, with the contention that, as a group, our freshmen leave because of faculty inadequacies. Finger pointing and quick fix solutions will not cure a complex problem.

*Hal Herzog, Psychology*

\* \* \*

Chancellor Bardo's opening faculty address this fall alluded to the faculty's responsibility for the low student retention rates at Western and, lo and behold, the first Faculty Forum of this semester not only supports that premise but goes a step further in saying that we are the primary cause of low retention. This brings up a far more interesting issue than student retention itself. Why is Western attracting so many low-quality, uncaring faculty? As the Chancellor noted, the student retention rates at Western have been significantly low for at least the past 26 years. If these low retention rates are mostly caused by poor faculty, it appears that Western has been a historical Mecca for poor faculty. What's causing this? Is it the mountain scenery that attracts us? Perhaps it's the low cost of living or the good working conditions. I imagine the retention rates at schools like NC State and Chapel Hill are fairly high. Maybe we should take seminars from these "more caring faculty" so we can learn how better to retain students.

Let's face it. Across the board, faculty at the various UNC institutions do not significantly differ in the way that they care about students. Should we be concerned about caring more about our students? Of course we should. But let's not delude ourselves into thinking that we are the primary cause of the low retention rates any more than an absence of bars is. By the way, J. Edwards now sells beer, wine and hard liquor drinks, so we should see those retention rates start to skyrocket any day now.

*Kurt Vandervoort, Chemistry and Physics*



## Responses to "The Faculty's Role in Student Retention," by Rob Routhieaux, 9/1/00

Rob Routhieaux's description of the elements of good teaching is right on the mark. However, I know of no data that support his claim that good teaching will increase student retention. Also, I know of no data that support the corollary claim that bad teaching is a cause of student attrition. When we look at the data about retention we see that student factors, rather than faculty factors, are the chief determinants of student retention. Schools that attract better prepared and more highly motivated students retain students at higher rates than schools that attract large numbers of students who are neither prepared for college nor interested in engaging in academic undertakings.

So, what is the member of the faculty who is troubled by WCU's low retention rate to do?

One response to the "crisis" in student retention is to blame the victims—our unprepared and unmotivated students. Another response is to heap scorn on the administration for making us, the faculty, scapegoats for our low retention rate. A third response is to make a genuine effort to foster the kind of intellectual climate at WCU that we value and that stimulated us during our own undergraduate careers. Can we do this by "raising the bar?" The evidence thus far suggests that raising the bar has little or no direct effect on retention, but it seems to me that it produces more interesting teaching opportunities for faculty and more interesting learning opportunities for students.

Are learning communities the solution? When learning communities are owned and operated by faculty who are adequately supported, it appears that they can motivate many unprepared students to work to stay in school. The key is to establish conditions that allow faculty to create the right kinds of learning communities. WCU is doing this better than it did two years ago, but not as well as it could or as it will. Is low retention simply a marketing problem? An effective leader of a college or university must be skilled at doing whatever good marketers do, but marketing magic alone is not sufficient to attract good students who want to be in college.

Rob Routhieaux's suggestions won't directly affect our retention rate. But if enough of us acted as he suggests we should, we could make changes in the climate at WCU that, over time, would make WCU more attractive to the kinds of students we value, those who are prepared for college and interested in learning.

*John Habel, Psychology*

\* \* \*

So there I was, striding across campus between buildings, between meetings. Ahead of me was Tom Canepa, the Associate Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Management himself, walking with a cellular phone to his ear. I caught up, slowed my gait to match his and Tom explained in a quiet voice, as he continued walking with cell to ear, that he didn't have time to listen to all his voice mail when he's in his office so he estimated that this was a good use of the 8 minutes it took him to walk from the White House to McKee. The retention problem is about **TIME**.

When staff, faculty, and administrators don't have time to stroll across campus and at the same time breathe, reflect, unwind, observe, greet, or chat, something's terribly wrong. I kept my slowed pace and Tom pocketed his cell phone. The enjoyable conversation that ensued revealed our similar observations about first year students who have difficulty being "present" in class due to their divided and distracted attention.

*Chris Gunn, Counseling & Psychological Services*



# Faculty Forum

*From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning*

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 13, No. 2

October 1, 2000

## **Cullowhee: A Place Apart From the Madding Crowd?**

In the August edition of *The Reporter*, Chancellor Bardo draws our attention to perhaps the most perplexing question at WCU: "Why don't our students stay?" Our retention problems have been blamed on everything from an uncaring faculty to the perception that there is a lack of exciting things to do in Cullowhee. While WCU loses only thirteen percent of its freshmen to academic suspension, our overall freshman non-retention rate is "nearly thirty-one percent." Lots of students who could stay here "make a choice not to return." Why?

Yesterday, in ten-minute conferences with my English 101 Learning Community students, we talked about our most recent assignment, the memoir. For most, this is their first college paper.

**Act 1:** Mike's paper talks about becoming an uncle for the first time. He reminisces about waiting for the late night phone call and about his mother's hysterics over her first grandchild. We talk about adding description, showing his mother's joy and his brother's anticipation. I suggest that Mike should describe the first time he held his nephew. But while we talk about descriptive details, about showing versus telling, we also talk about school. "How's school going?" I ask.

"It's alright. Things are pretty good, and the Learning Community is good, too. It helps when you have questions about what's going on in class," Mike says, nodding his head. (This year, our Learning Community decided to capitalize on WCU's unique locale: the mountains, the rivers, and our history; ultimately we are trying to explore the ways people find value in places, specifically the western North Carolina mountains.)

"How do you like it here?" I venture to inquire.

"Well, I'm not used to all this outdoor stuff. I'm used to staying home and going to the mall. I'm from near Raleigh and we don't do all this," Mike says, shrugging his shoulders.

**Act 2:** We read David's paper about surfing. His story begins as he and his brother are caught in the middle of a storm; from there he describes the high waves, the howling winds, and the prevailing danger. Yet, in between the saltwater and rolling currents, David describes, with considerable insight, the significance of surfing; it reigns as his passion, the core of his relationships, and his outlet for recreation. I am moved by his powerful descriptions, and I am stunned as he reveals the many meanings of this sport. At the same time, it leads me to comment, "This is really nice, David. But I have to ask, 'Why are you at Western?'" Here we step beyond the real purpose of the conference; we're no longer talking words, sentences, and descriptions. David mentions that his grades were good enough to get into NC State, but then he replies, "I don't know. I just don't know."

The examples of Mike and David typify the experiences of many of our freshmen. I consider myself a caring faculty member, willing to spend time assisting students in meeting academic standards and willing to establish relationships with them. However, Mike and David have the credentials to be here, perhaps ought to be here, yet don't have a fundamental reason for wanting to be here. We gather students like Mike from bigger cities that are surrounded by malls, stores, movies, bars, and so-called conveniences at every turn. The transition to Cullowhee is abrupt.



Also, we entice students, like David, whose passions are miles away from the mountains and rivers of this area, and their transition is also unsettling. While I recognize that some students may eventually discover Cullowhee as a treasure in the mountains, with plenty of recreation, rigorous academics, little traffic, and nice people, we rely too much on hoping that our students will find something here that they like. Instead we should harness our resources and consciously attract students who WANT to be in an area like ours: near the mountains and rivers, away from the cities, and in a place where one has to be resourceful to be content.

Unlike a third of our first-year students, it seems our faculty wants to be here. Several years ago, Mary Jean Herzog assisted in a study that polled faculty attitudes about working and living at WCU. When faculty were asked to list their top three reasons for liking WCU, they said, "Location, Location, Location." It seems that many of us like being here because of its remoteness and recreational opportunities. We chose Cullowhee. Our happiness relies only partly on the people we work with, the available technology, the academic rigors of the university, and interaction with students. Much of our happiness derives from our passion for this place.

It may sound as if I'm suggesting an expansion of the Parks and Recreation curriculum or perhaps a focus on majors such as Biology or Natural Resource Management, which take advantage of our natural surroundings. That's not a bad idea. The students in these programs are probably the ones who stay because they like the area and find something to do--backpacking, hiking, kayaking, fishing, biking, and climbing. Schools near us--such as Brevard College, Montreat, and now even Southwestern Community College--have used their locationally relevant programs as a substantial tool to attract students. In fact, Montreat has over 80 students in their PRM program; that's 10% of their student body. One might argue that if these nearby schools have such strong programs then we don't need to. But perhaps we should look closely at developing a competitive Parks and Recreation program, with sufficient instructors and new equipment, because schools like Montreat might be keeping their students as a result of such programs.

The answer to retention is complex, but perhaps we have overlooked an obvious piece to the puzzle. Have we used our resources--our essential identity--as a way to draw students who want to be here? Do we attract students who come here knowing full well what this place entails? Do we market the truth of our location to incoming students? Or do we put on a quasi-urban façade in hopes that they won't discover that things get quiet after ten, that parties happen on mountainsides, or that not many people show up for the regularly scheduled bands? Do we have an identity crisis, trying to attract urban students and then hoping that they won't notice that we're not Chapel Hill or Appalachian State? Perhaps we should capitalize on the qualities that set us apart from our sister schools. Are we afraid to be explicitly Cullowhee, a quiet town, far from the convenience of the cities yet rich with cultural heritage and recreational opportunities? How about taking what some students complain of as "nothing to do" and marketing that message across our region, even our entire country--"Cullowhee, a place of learning, peace, beauty, and everything to discover?" Can we be a university that offers a number of majors focusing on the uniqueness of Western North Carolina's setting and cultural history? It would seem to be commonsensical to target big cities on recruitment crusades, but are those the students who are most likely to be happy at WCU? Would it not make more sense to focus on recruiting students from non-urban areas or recruiting students who want a non-urban experience? How do we maximize our draw based on our locale? Celebrate the uniqueness of Cullowhee, and perhaps they will come. . .and stay.

**April Lewandowski, English**

*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 "Cullowhee: A Place Apart From the Madding Crowd?," by April Lewandowski, 10/1/00

April Lewandowski's Forum piece suggests that Western, like Shakespeare's King Lear, hath ever but slenderly known itself. I'd add that our confusion goes beyond our sense of place.

•Since I came here (the same year Chancellor Bardo did), I've heard that we should "raise the bar" and become a National Merit school. Yet even as we struggle to overcome our credibility gap, we're talking seriously about eliminating majors like Philosophy and Physics that most help students succeed on the GRE, the LSAT, and GMAT--disciplines that define us as intellectually serious. Our peers at the North Carolina Faculty Assembly agree. "How can you call yourselves a University?" they ask, without the very majors we're thinking of cutting under program review. The Chancellor may believe the definition of a university is fluid, but we should give some weight to the derision of fellow educators, since their students influence ours.

•I've heard that science and humanities departments with few majors must lose positions. But other schools in our system keep those majors alive, despite shrinking enrollments, because they know that's how you attract the best full-time faculty to teach general education. We know that a strong liberal studies program is critical to our retention efforts. What faculty who had the power to go would stay here, knowing they could not teach advanced courses in the disciplines they've devoted their lives to?

•I've heard that we need to do more in general education, where our courses are taught by part-timers. But because we know our survival depends on keeping our majors, we must struggle to cover our major courses. And we've lost full-time faculty positions, not just because of our enrollment, but also because of an unprecedented five-year phased retirement scheme (two years longer than those of other schools in the UNC system) that puts a crippling burden of service on every remaining faculty member.

•We've heard we are the "most wired" so often that some think we're becoming a technical school. Yet we have an archaic and confusing web site that hasn't been redesigned since Dr. Bardo and I came here. We have no real college or department web support, no dial-up access, and few courses available on weekends. We can't compete with technical schools and community colleges, arguably "more wired," and we do little to appeal to the non-traditional students they attract.

•We've heard that our leaders do what "we" want them to do. But despite our emphasis on faculty governance, faculty are losing power. Non-teaching administrators vote on our faculty senate and dominate "our" proceedings. We're heading in the direction of many schools, hiring more and more adjunct instructors who, though well qualified, are vulnerable, over extended, and undervalued. As a body, our contact with students and our power to dissent will dwindle.

In the Middle Ages, students paid teachers directly, and teachers paid administrators an allowance to clean up their offices and do their dirty work. But "when we gavest them the rod," Lear's fool says, we "put'st down our own breeches." Now faculty--never more expendable--are eager to please and easier to blame. We even blame ourselves. We do more and give ourselves less credit. And we are "most loath to call our faults as they are named."  
*Mary Adams, English*

\* \* \*

Thanks to April Lewandowski for her perspective on Cullowhee as a location. I've also explored with my Learning Community why they are here. The two most passionate answers they give are related to getting away from Mom to discover their personal identity and to not getting into App with friends (they plan to transfer next year). But most of the students have already found lots of new friends and fun things to do in Cullowhee and plan to stay here.

- - -Continue - - -



**Responses to "Cullowhee: A Place Apart," by April Lewandowski, 10/1/00**

Isn't college about stretching, exploring, meeting new and different people, and having new and exciting experiences? While I agree with April that we ought to market WCU to students who are predisposed to liking Cullowhee, let's still try to attract those for whom liking Cullowhee will be a distinct challenge. I like the way Dr. Bardo emphasizes at Open Houses that not everyone will fit in here. Maybe we should rejoice that the unhappy student leaves after a year, despite how our retention rate looks. As Gael Graham pointed out in the last Forum response, personal decisions by 19-year-olds to leave WCU are valid no matter what faculty and administration think about the values involved.

I was reading the history of one of the private schools in these mountains and they stated their educational purpose was to provide an education close to home so the natives wouldn't have to disrupt their lives and values through exposure to a remote world. Perhaps this made sense when roads were rotten and the economy was lower than the pits. WCU started out with the same mission, and every time a local election comes up it is apparent that there are those who think WCU ought to be still serving only the locals, preferably with native faculty. But this would be a poor campus, offering poor education, if we never mixed in those with other, wider experiences and expectations. That means students as well as faculty and administrators. How can we tap what these young adults know to make life richer for all of us?

*Sharon Jacques, Nursing*

\* \* \*

So much of what April is saying rings true. But how can this emphasis be expected to take place when much of our biology program is simply being downsized? (we now have 6 full-time members compared to the 13 we had in 1995).

*Dan Pittillo, Biology*

\* \* \*

Bravo, April! As one who chose Cullowhee because of the location, I agree that we should tell prospective students more about where we are. And we should certainly do everything we can to ensure that students don't come here with false expectations.

In my 1993 doctoral dissertation, I argued (persuasively enough to get five signatures on the title page) that colleges that accurately portray their campus culture in their recruiting literature wind up with more-satisfied students and higher retention rates. We may be making progress in this regard. Western's current viewbook, "Power Your Mind," includes eight sentences about our location, up from zero sentences last year. The best two are a direct quotation from Ryan Taylor, a junior who was last year's state champion in downhill mountain biking. "Cullowhee has ideal conditions year-round for mountain biking," he says. "Some of the best trails in the country are right outside my door." The rest of the text could be problematic: "Go Ahead! Get your boots wet--riding the rapids, cleaning up a river, or testing the quality of the water. Western's location near the Great Smoky Mountains of North Carolina calls you into the great outdoors. Find yourself maintaining a trail, doing environmental research, or digging up the past alongside your professors. And did we mention? Our cool mountains are so hot some nine million people choose them every year as their vacation destination." I can't help but wonder if the writer knew that the lack of air conditioning in WCU's residence halls is a bone of contention among students.

Why don't we confess that the nearest mall is 50 miles away, that there's only one place in the county where you can get a burger at 2 a.m. and you need a car to get there, and that Sylva's three-plex won't show many of the movies they'd most like to see? Confess? Heck, let's revel in it. The best single recruiting piece I ever saw in 17 years of college PR work was an eight-minute video produced by Carleton College. About six of those minutes were devoted to how big and bad the mosquitoes are in Minnesota. But even better, why don't we let the students tell us what kind of place this is? They're the ones who know us best.

*John Slater, Communication and Theatre Arts*





# Faculty Forum

*From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning*

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 13, No. 3

November 1, 2000

## **The Faculty's Role: To Govern or Advise?**

In September, Rich Kucharski, WCU Legal Counsel, spoke to the Senate and explained that according to The Code of the University of North Carolina the Chancellor is ultimately and legally responsible for all aspects of the operation of our university. In the discussion and debate that followed, I sensed a degree of resignation among senators. To paraphrase one who spoke with me after the meeting, "*Governance* is the wrong word to describe the faculty role on campus. Our role is advisory." This statement was not made in despair but perhaps in the spirit of resigned matter of fact. Although I agree with the statement, I see our advisory role as an opportunity for greater, not lesser, faculty significance.

Some faculty, however, believe that our administrators have often opposed faculty improvement efforts, and these faculty bemoan the absence of what they consider a real governing role--one where faculty make and enforce policies. They recall situations in which a Chancellor or other administrator opposed something wanted by a group of faculty. Therefore, some faculty want a stronger role for faculty governance, a role that would effectively balance and possibly offset administrative opposition to faculty interests.

I agree with this understanding of our history, but I disagree with the conclusion that we ought to assert ourselves more in the policy arena. We have no choice but to acknowledge that our role is advisory, with legal authority and responsibility invested in the Chancellor. It is time to temper our quixotic tendencies and focus our collective efforts on those faculty concerns that are our responsibility.

At the August 17 General Faculty meeting I proposed that we have an opportunity to become an elite, regional, comprehensive university (ERCU). I think we can define what this means, in part, by re-designing the Faculty Senate. The consultant who worked with our recent Task Force on University Governance (TFUG) knows of no other university that has traveled as far as we have toward an understanding of appropriate governance roles for faculty, students, administration, and staff. Now we need to give substance to our understanding. To do so, we must answer the question, "How would a faculty at an ERCU organize itself so that it can effectively participate in the improvement of the institution?" Answering this question is the job of the Senate Re-structuring Task Force, and I offer the following ideas from our own faculty as a starting point.

During TFUG deliberations, Gary Smith often pointed out that governance involves more than making and enforcing policies. In his words, we are all involved in governance as we exercise "voice, vote, and influence." And this is my response to faculty who associate governance with policy-making and policy-enforcing. Even in highly bureaucratic organizations, individuals without policy roles engage in organizational governance through their voice and influence. Therefore, although I agree that our role is advisory, I do not conclude that we are not involved in university governance. Instead, we can have a significant impact on Western if we build an effective faculty governance body. For better or worse, our faculty organizational structures and processes have always been, and will continue to be, the foundation for all our improvement



efforts. If we are well organized, we are likely to achieve our goals. If we lack effective structures and processes, it is unlikely we will achieve or sustain institutional improvements.

The *Faculty Forum* piece you are reading is an example of a structure that fosters the achievement of our goals. Its purpose is to be a campus-wide forum for faculty concerns, a "voice," as it were. I am using it to present ideas about how to build more effective faculty governance at WCU. On the other hand, our university-wide election last March is an example of what happens when our organization does not fit our purposes. During the time leading up to the election, no structure was in place for candidates to explain where they stand on different issues. As a consequence, faculty lost opportunities to bring concerns to the table and to hear candidates address what is important to them. Furthermore, without an opportunity to present my positions, I had no clear mandate to direct what I was elected to do. Terry Kinnear had similar feelings after he was re-elected in 1998. If we recognize the importance of faculty voice and influence, we will build the structures and processes that will enable us to lead and participate in efforts to improve WCU. If we pit ourselves against administrative concerns, we are likely to be ineffective--our voice will be weak, and our influence will be seen as self-serving. The point is that we can organize ourselves better, and an improved organization begins with a vision for exercising our voice and influence to benefit the university.

Members of the Task Force on University Governance also developed ten "Standards of Good Governance" (I call them principles of good governance). I propose that our Senate borrow heavily from the university governance standards, which address the same organizational questions as those confronting the Senate--Who should be included? Which are our domains of responsibility? What should our structures look like? What procedures will enable us to be effective and efficient?

A third piece of work that can inform the work of the Senate task force is a thought-provoking paper published in 1991 by Bruce Henderson and Bill Kane. They point out that the conflict that simmers within the faculties of regional, comprehensive universities may have its roots in a misunderstanding of the mission of our university classification. In their paper they describe the desires of some faculty to emulate the culture of Research I institutions and the desires of others to emulate the culture of the liberal arts college. Our WCU faculty culture reflects some of this same conflict, and addressing it directly might be the first step toward becoming an ERCU--an institution that blends the best elements of the other classifications.

In conclusion, our review of faculty governance is an opportunity to take hold of our responsibilities in new ways. Can we establish faculty structures and processes that are models of effectiveness for regional comprehensive universities? Because of the work already completed, I believe we are well on our way. Before we move further, though, I want all faculty to see the direction we are taking and to have the opportunity to participate in our re-structuring effort. If you have any ideas you want to share, or if you are interested in becoming part of the Senate Re-structuring Task Force, simply contact me or Roger Higgs, chair of our Re-structuring Task Force.

### **Casey Hurley, Faculty Chair**

*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 Forum

*From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning*

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 13, No. 4

December 1, 2000

## **Learning Communities: Are They Worth the Investment?**

WCU is in its third year of enrolling freshmen in "Learning Communities." These learning communities typically link three freshman courses around a central topic, and the students take the three courses as a group. In addition to taking the three courses together, learning community students live in the same residence hall, engage in special activities with the group outside of class, and get additional support from a Student Affairs staff member and a peer mentor.

The primary goals of learning communities appear to be improving retention and grades, increasing student satisfaction with the college experience, and increasing interaction between students, faculty, and the university community at large. Retention is the primary goal and reason for piloting the first learning communities in the fall of 1998. These goals could be viewed as either social or academic, but the connection between the social and academic goals cannot be overlooked. For example, there is the belief that "happy and satisfied" students will remain at WCU and make better grades. Hence, increasing student satisfaction and involvement in the university will improve retention and GPA. The question remains, however, have we achieved these goals with the learning communities?

Based on current university data, learning communities have not met the goals of improving retention and/or grades at WCU; there are no significant differences in retention or GPA between students involved in learning communities and those not involved. As faculty who were involved in the first piloted learning community in the fall of 1998, our initial suspicion was that there would be no differences in GPA, considering that we taught both those involved in a learning community and those who were not and could make cursory comparisons. The university data subsequently supported our initial suspicion.

So, are there any differences between learning communities and regular classes? The biggest difference we observed was in the social component. Students in the learning community bond together as a social group even prior to the first day of class. Adjustment to college is stressful and building a new social support system, after leaving the old one at home, is crucial to successfully adjusting to college life. The students are more vocal and interactive in the classroom compared to students in regular classes, and the students provide social support for each other. Many of the students appear to like the learning community concept, even though some also say too much "togetherness" can prevent them from "branching" out and forming other friendships. So, yes, there may be at least social value in learning communities, but we need to explore this further and examine the effect on the academic goals.

A major challenge for any teacher is maintaining control of the classroom in order to achieve academic goals while still allowing free exchange of ideas and thoughts; this balance of control and freedom may be even more difficult within a learning community. The college classroom is often the first learning environment that encourages freedom of expression. Many freshmen say that their high school classrooms were highly structured and that they were not allowed to question any information. Learning community students, as a bonded unit and being



the adolescents they are, may try to take advantage of the classroom environment with their contribution to class discussion, quickly diverting the focus from the academic to the social. Freedom can thus be a two-edged sword. We want students to critically analyze the material and contribute to class discussion, but their immaturity and lack of self-discipline is often apparent when they go off on tangents without remaining focused on the academic task at hand. Thus, when asked by a college professor as to their opinion on a subject of discussion in the classroom, the students sometimes express a personal opinion irrespective of rational and logical conclusion(s), without thinking critically about the subject or without considering a set of objective facts. These personal opinions can quickly become the dominant discourse with learning community students. There is a delicate balance between allowing students the freedom of expression and keeping them focused on achieving academic goals. Thus, discipline can be a problem in the learning community classroom as students ban together in an effort to control the discussion, especially when, according to one learning community teacher, the "social" leaders override the "academic" leaders. A subsequent "gang mentality" can surface. It takes a seasoned and experienced teacher to "let go" in the learning community classroom and yet maintain its desired direction.

While the concept of the learning community is to increase interaction between faculty and students, the type of interaction should be carefully considered. Somehow, out-of-class activities such as going to "Six Flags" just do not quite achieve the connection between the social and academic components, in our view. This type of increased interaction could be viewed by students as meaning that the faculty are their "buddies." While offering caring and genuine support to students should be of utmost importance, this could be misperceived by freshmen and result in their perception of the classroom as a time for social rather than academic interaction, hence contributing to the previously mentioned problems in the classroom. We are reminded of a parent who once told the child, "I cannot be a parent and a buddy at the same time."

While it is laudable as the goal of retention to strengthen the connection of students to the university environment, what is or should be the connection between the social and academic areas? This answer has yet to be determined. Having "happy, satisfied" students does not nor will not guarantee academic success or improved retention. Whereas the learning communities appear successful in energizing the social component of education, problems exist in correlating this social energy with the academic component of university learning. One of the first academic "lessons" that freshmen should learn in order to achieve academic success is responsibility for their own learning. Many traditional freshmen are shocked by differences between the high school and college classroom and the expectation of studying two hours outside the classroom for every one hour of class time. Are learning communities providing this lesson? So far, we have not been successful in channeling the social energies into the academic arena and achieving the connection between the two.

Considering the fact that learning communities are an integral part of the new Liberal Studies program to be implemented next fall, it is time to seriously consider whether learning communities are worth the amount of resources invested. If the answer is "yes," then we must address how to appropriately and successfully link the social and academic goals of learning communities to really improve retention and student success at WCU.

**Millie Abel, Psychology**  
**Malcolm Abel, Business Administration, Law, and Marketing**

*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 "Learning Communities: Are They Worth the Investment?" by Millie and Malcolm Abel, 12/1/00**

I was exposed to the Learning Community Concept this semester when I was engaged to teach an introductory sociology class. Although an adjunct instructor, I have taught at several universities and community colleges throughout the United States and Europe and have faced a myriad of institutional methodologies and conceptual class groupings. This semester alone I tackled the responsibility for eight classes, both here at WCU and at the community college.

While not fully aware of the umbrella academic-social ties envisioned by the Learning Community concept at WCU, my experience this semester leads me to support the finding of Professors Millie and Malcolm Abel as outlined in the Faculty Forum, dated December 1, 2000. I strongly support their contention that Learning Community students have a tendency to "quickly divert the focus from the academic to the social" during class discussions.

My classes are purposely structured to invite and promote open discussion, self-expression, and development of thinking processes. They are hands-on based and include numerous small-group exercises. However, I found I spent considerably more time with the Learning Community class returning each small group exercise to the academic subject matter, as opposed to them continuously drifting into individualized discussions of who was doing what with whom outside the classroom.

While I enjoyed the nearly instantaneous openness of the group due to their 24-hour-a-day contact with one another, their lack of maturity in revealing the most intimate details concerning one another's lives in open forum was many times disruptive. Individual personality conflicts that began in social settings found their way into the classroom. Overall, I felt this class was generally more immature, as a collective whole, in their approach to sociological subject matter as compared to my other classes this semester and those I have previously taught.

Based on my experience with a Learning Community class, solely within a classroom environment, I find no viable strength in the Learning Community concept. If the statistical facts do not support improved retention or significant academic achievement, I do not find from my one small sample that financial support for the program is warranted.

*Michael Hagan, Department of Anthropology & Sociology*

Millie Abel and Malcolm Abel are correct in many of their observations about WCU's first experiments with Learning Communities. One of the initial motivations for exploring learning communities was our university's poor retention rate for freshmen, so it's reasonable that in the first attempts, the emphasis was on "community," perhaps at the expense of academic and learning outcomes. However, that does not have to be the case.

The General Education Review Committee embraced learning communities not as a retention tool but as a means of fostering shared learning--by students, of course, but also by faculty as mentors, demonstrating the lifelong learning process. The Liberal Studies program document consistently uses the term "Academic Learning Community" to intentionally focus on the learning rather than the social part of the community. In an initial attempt to facilitate this emphasis on learning, the Coulter Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning offered workshops for faculty involved in learning communities to develop learning community-building course activities.

Our experience in Learning Community 3, Society and the Environment, suggests that students can be interested in academic rather than social, community experiences. Purely social interaction opportunities were poorly attended by our group of students, and it was clear that they were skeptical

**Responses to "Learning Communities: Are They Worth the Investment?," by Millie and Malcolm Abel, 12/1/00**

of the benefit of these activities. However, required academic activities, consisting of field trips to Jackson Paper and Oak Ridge National Laboratories (closely connected to the environmental content of both academic courses) ended up building true community--the kind that happens incidentally from a shared experience--rather than the artificial type forced by an engineered social situation. Scheduling the academic courses back-to-back, with attendance by all instructors at both academic classes, gave us sufficient contact with our students and showed the students our commitment to our shared academic experience (we learned a lot, too!). We also replaced an ineffective student peer mentor with a very capable peer tutor for one of the academic classes, further demonstrating our commitment to their learning experience and providing reinforcement for their academic skills. The result has been a **learning** and **community** experience in which at-risk students have been able to "figure college out" and have met our raised-bar standards. We genuinely believe they are much more well prepared to succeed academically in their undergraduate careers than they were four months ago, and we got there by putting our resources and energy into our academic classes.

We believe the learning community experiment is worth pursuing; it probably needs some further tuning, and we know it takes a lot of work, but it's also fun, and we believe there is potential for success.

*Cindy Atterholt, Chemistry & Physics*  
*Scott Philyaw, History*  
*Nory Prochaska, Math & CS*

The value of a learning community is not necessarily in retention, or numbers, or in a sundry of other objectives. This past semester, Dr. James Ullmer and I taught a successful learning community. We engaged our students in rigorous work, we held high expectations, and we merged academic and residential life. Will these students return? Will they stay at WCU? If we only look to answer these questions then perhaps we have displaced what we value as educators. If a learning community helps me teach better and enables my students to do rigorous work, if it connects me to other disciplines in the university and helps predispose my students in favor of writing, or economics, or perhaps academic endeavors in general, then isn't there some value in learning communities--beyond retention rates?

*April Lewandowski, English*





# Faculty Forum

*From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning*

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 13, No. 5

February 1, 2001

## **An Alternative to Program Deletion**

As members of the University Strategic Planning Committee, my colleagues and I have been charged with the difficult and disheartening task of recommending certain degree programs for termination due to low enrollment. I have lost considerable sleep and spent much too much time wondering how we have come to this point.

If one questions administrative officers about the rationale behind this drastic measure we are basically told that the "bean counters in the legislature" have been instrumental in initiating these actions. One must then ask why state government has, after a hundred years of allowing universities considerable autonomy, suddenly become so interested in monitoring a traditionally independent university system? Why are we now hearing such catch phrases as "accountability" being routinely used and accepted by so many? The easy answer is that university "costs" have not been contained and that the university system has not done a particularly good job of maximizing its allocated funds. If we accept this answer the next question becomes "why"? The easiest answer is that there are certain programs not generating enough graduates, not interesting enough students, and, thus, for vibrant programs to grow, positions must come from the stagnant, nonproductive ones. But I have come to believe this is only a part of our problem. A more ominous and threatening variable has evolved that, in my opinion, has depleted the upper ranks of teaching faculty, increased bureaucracy, increased workload for everyone and driven the costs of education up to the point where legislatures refuse to pay the bills without more concrete notions of "accountability." This variable is administrative growth.

It is difficult to accurately document the exact nature and extent of this growth. While some administrative positions have been consolidated, expansion has occurred in other areas. Associate Vice Chancellor positions are now commonplace and Associate Dean positions are also an accepted part of our institutional landscape. Department Heads/Chairs are so overwhelmed by bureaucracy that they are leaving these positions in droves. The Administration building, which some believe was built with too many floors to begin with, has now overflowed across campus to several other locations. In my opinion this administrative growth has accomplished three things. It has:

1. Created an unprecedented expansion of bureaucracy and a deluge of trivial, never ending paperwork with every new administrator requiring surveys, assessments, or other elements of paper shuffling that inevitably make their way down to an already overwhelmed faculty who must respond in ways that distract from the mission of teaching. Obviously, we are mostly responding, either reactively or proactively, to dictates from the legislature, General Administration, or other external sources.
2. Depleted the upper ranks of faculty who, for whatever reason, have forsaken their chosen careers to become bureaucrats. One need only review the BD119 to be shocked by the number of \$80,000.00 salaries of former professors who are now occupants of the White House. While many of these faculty were replaced (usually by junior faculty), they now generate such excessive paperwork that they are stifling those who want to teach. This is a difficult observation to acknowledge as all the people I know in this



category are wonderful, hardworking professionals who have given significantly to this university for great portions of their professional lives.

3. Drastically driven up the cost of a university education without making a direct contribution to the central mission of teaching. If we have arrived at a point where reallocation of positions is the only way for thriving departments to grow, perhaps we need to look at other ways to generate teaching positions or at least increase the number of courses taught.

I thus submit that we should return administrators to the classroom. Every administrator with teaching credentials--from the Chancellor to the Deans--should teach at least one course per semester. Reallocating a portion of their administrative duties back to their departments could free up positions for reallocation to those departments in greatest need of enhancement, those with the greatest potential for growth. A by-product of this return to teaching would be administrators who would devote one third to one quarter of their time to teaching and would no longer have the time to create frivolous requests for sometimes meaningless information, a situation that would make everyone's life more pleasant. It might even result in department heads having the time to build or create cutting-edge departments that generate student numbers in new and vibrant ways rather than limiting them to responding to the overwhelming request for reports, surveys and other information. This suggestion is not without precedent. The State University of West Georgia has experienced continuous growth over the last several decades and their President teaches at least one course per year. Within the College of Applied Sciences Dean Depew has begun teaching this semester, showing that administrators can find the time for teaching if they have the desire, and Dean Vartabedian from the College of Arts and Sciences taught a class last semester. I thus call upon Chancellor Bardo and his exhaustingly long list of fellow administrators to return to the classroom if they are qualified and let's see the impact this has on our struggling system. In fact, return them all to liberal studies. After all, we have been told our brightest and most qualified should teach at this level. Imagine the impact on retention when a first semester freshman tells his/her mom and dad, "The Chancellor is teaching my first college course"!

### **Duane Davis, Criminal Justice**

*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 "An Alternative to Program Deletion" by Duane Davis, 2/1/01

Although I suspect much of Duane's article is tongue-in-cheek, he makes some very good points about priorities and resources at WCU. But, what struck me most were two things. First, this comes from a member of the Strategic Planning Committee, and, second, it comes from a member of a department that stands to gain if smaller programs are cut. This debate has badly damaged or destroyed what some used to call a "community of scholarship." Duane's piece was a balm on a festering sore.

*Gary White, Geosciences and Natural Resource Management*

Duane's piece reminded me of something that occurred during my doctoral study. During one of our routine "bull sessions," our advisor/mentor presented the following two scenarios to a group of his minions.

1. It's Spring break. All campus administrators board an airplane and travel to a retreat in some northern hinterland. Shortly after they arrive, the blizzard of the century hits. The administrators are safe but completely snowed-in and unable to communicate with the outside world for three months.
2. It's Spring break. All faculty members board airplanes and travel to a workshop in some remote jungle. Shortly after they arrive, the flood of the century hits. The faculty members are safe but completely isolated and unable to communicate with the outside world for three months.

He listened as we discussed the scenarios (in the rambling, complex, competitive way that only highly enlightened doctoral students can do). Finally, he instructed us to identify which of the two sets of conditions he had posited would result in the immediate cessation of all teaching and learning activities and under which of the two circumstances teaching and learning could continue. Then he asked us which of the two groups was really the most important to the life of the university.

*Walt Foegelle, Health Sciences*

While reading Duane's recent opinion piece, I was reminded of a finding made in the mid-1970's by the Committee on Organization. During the Institutional Self-Study, done in conjunction with the SACS visitation, this committee discovered that there were, at that time, 17.5 faculty positions (other than those called for by the Table of Organization) devoted to administration. Subsequently, the university undertook a serious effort to work with General Administration to officially convert some of these positions to administrative positions and/or to consolidate some administrative functions so as to return other positions to teaching. But, however serious this effort was played out, the university eventually drifted back to using an increasing number of teaching positions for administrative functions. Currently, that number could be approximately double the percentage from the mid 70's, while enrollment has remained about the same.

As I look today at the faculty roster simply for the College of Arts and Sciences, the full-time and part-time positions that are devoted to administration total approximately 19. Some of these are called for by the Table of Organization while others are faculty positions being used for administrative purposes. Assuming a faculty-student ratio of 1 to 16, the removal of 19 positions from our effective teaching faculty drives that faculty-student ratio up to over 1 to 18. As Duane pointed out, this results in fewer faculty to share the teaching load; hence, larger classes. Specifically, for those faculty fortunate enough to teach four courses with an average enrollment of 16, the impact of the above shift

- - -Continue - - -



## **Responses to "An Alternative to Program Deletion," by Duane Davis, 2/1/01**

in the faculty-student ratio is a gain of 8 students. For those who teach in departments where the average enrollment per course is closer to 32, the impact is a gain of some 16 students (a number equivalent to another course when the faculty-student ratio was 16).

As Duane also pointed out, the individual who moves from the faculty ranks to administration usually moves up to a higher salary. With salary increments computed in terms of percentages, these "new" administrators reap a higher gain in salary than those in the teaching ranks; and, over the years, some have felt that the salary money often times has been applied there first or applied there more liberally than to the teaching ranks.

Fact Book 2000 indicates that the faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences makes up forty-three percent of the total W.C.U. faculty. If the number of teaching positions being used as administrative positions is spread somewhat uniformly throughout the colleges, this would indicate that there are approximately forty-four teaching positions that are currently being used as administrative positions. Again, this number includes those called for by the Table of Organization as well as the "converted" teaching positions. Admittedly, I do not have access to all the data. If the numbers presented here are far off the mark, I will be the first to step back and admit my error in the face of the correct data. Perhaps the Office of University Planning can help us make a clear explanation of the current state of affairs.

Each administration, of course, has to decide how best to use its personnel resources to accomplish its specific goals and objectives. But however laudatory these administrative functions are toward the university's over-all mission, the administrative officers must continually strive for a balance and continually re-evaluate to determine the appropriate balance of administrative and faculty positions.

### ***Ralph Willis, Mathematics and Computer Science***

I'm impressed by Duane Davis' line of reasoning in his article last week. It reminds me of Jesus' statement about criticism. If the administrators are eager to remove the mote from the eye of all those unprofitable academic programs, then they probably ought to attend first to the beam in their own. Has the expansion of their ranks made their operation more profitable to anyone but themselves?

And is anyone looking at the profitability of our athletic programs?

### ***Karl Nicholas, English***



# Faculty Forum

*From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning*

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 13, No. 6

March 1, 2001

## **Learning Communities: Chaos or Cooperation?**

*"Your presence in the class is disruptive and affects the other students!"*  
(A teacher's complaint to the teenage Albert Einstein)

A few weeks ago, faculty received a memo from Fred Hinson reminding us that the new Liberal Studies Program "requires the participation of all freshmen in an Academic Learning Community in the Fall Semester 2001." We are told that this is one part of our "aggressive approach to support student success and persistence in the freshman year." As one who has taught in learning communities ever since they were introduced at WCU, let me tell you that this campus is not prepared for what we are likely to experience next fall.

In an earlier Faculty Forum piece, Millie and Malcolm Abel questioned whether the investment in learning communities was worth it in view of the "gang mentality," the "immaturity," the "lack of self-discipline," and the tendency to divert "the focus from the academic to the social." Others have commented on the rudeness, the disorder, and the general lack of common courtesy that they experienced in their learning communities. Furthermore, virtually everyone I have talked to who has taught in these learning communities also complains about class behavior and lack of civility. Imagine what will happen to the academic environment at WCU when every freshman is in one of these learning communities? If you have ever been a substitute teacher in a high school you might have an idea of what to expect.

In spite of these problems, I am optimistic that in the long run we can resolve these issues, enhance the learning and intellectual atmosphere here at WCU, and at the same time improve "persistence," if that is the proper codeword now. But, to be successful, it may require a completely different approach to classroom management on the part of many instructors. My first learning community course was the worst class I ever had. I admit that at first I just pulled out the stops and exerted heavy-handed authority. Soon the class was orderly enough, but for that class I had become another in a string of insignificant adults trying to control them instead of guiding them in the process of learning. However, after making some major changes in my approach, each experience has gotten progressively better. At some point I remembered a story Eliot Wiggington told about the start of the Foxfire approach to education. One day, as a new teacher, he had turned his back on his class to write notes on the board. When he turned around, his lectern was on fire. That got his attention. But he did what I did not do that first time. He stopped his agenda, which after all was not working, and asked the students how they as a class might go about learning to write well and understand literature. The result was the first *Foxfire* magazine, a collection of contemporary poetry and essays by the students about local Appalachian craftspeople, which became the seed for the Foxfire books and the Foxfire approach to education. The key is to get students engaged to the point that they feel some "ownership" of the course—not an easy thing to do.

Before we move further into this venture, I suggest we thoughtfully examine the causes for these classroom behaviors. Usually, freshmen experience an abrupt change from high school to college. They move into a dorm surrounded by strangers whom they see only occasionally. They move from class to class as isolated individuals, not as a group, and professors as a whole seem considerably more formal, distant, and demanding than their high school teachers. Students



eventually develop social bonds outside of class but they rarely have the opportunity to extend these connections in class because their behavioral standards have already been established before the social cohesion occurred. This is the model used by governments and other organizations that want to minimize social resistance and establish their own authority and control. Unfortunately, the result is often indoctrination rather than intellectual inquiry or genuine learning.

The learning community model starts with a social bonding in the dorm that extends throughout the day. The ideal is that the students will engage as a cohort with the intellectual or academic issues of their learning community. What often happens is quite different. As students move from class to class as a social unit, the instructor becomes an outnumbered outsider whose authority can easily be challenged. Even if the student feels the group is misbehaving, peer pressure is extremely powerful and hard to resist. It is easier to have fun. Classroom management then becomes an issue of control or entertainment. Without a change in our approach, we will, in effect, turn our students back into high school students and ourselves into interlopers.

If we really want this experiment with learning communities to work without turning the campus into a struggle for power, we must ask ourselves several fundamental questions: (1) Which is more important--an orderly class that follows our syllabus and class notes or a class where students deeply engage in the process of learning and inquiry into our field of study even if the classroom is somewhat disorderly? (2) Is our idea of paying attention based on a silent reception of information, or are we more interested in a mindful encounter with the core concepts where students often doubt, question, and reframe the sacred cows of our profession? (3) Do we insist that students first master a hierarchy of fundamentals even if they have to memorize them before moving on to more global concepts or do we believe that students learn best by being presented problems in a larger context that need solving or problems whose solution is still problematic? (4) Do we think that the information we have to teach is essentially stable and that our job is to present it or can we introduce the concepts of our disciplines as conditional assertions open to doubt and contextual interpretation? If your answers favor the first part of these questions, then avoid learning communities.

For those of us who are willing to change our ways, a learning community can become one of the most exciting experiences in an academic career. Based on what I have learned from my learning communities, here are some suggestions on how to make it happen. Start the semester by personally engaging individually with students, finding out their background, learning styles, and academic and recreation experiences. This way you defuse the gang spirit. Next, have the class develop its own code of conduct that everyone agrees on and everyone agrees to help enforce. This minimizes the interruptions and side conversations. Then develop a series of learning strategies with the class. Outline briefly the core issues of the course and some of the intellectual problems with these concepts. Then ask the class to come up with how they might best approach and learn these core issues, problems, and concepts. Next ask how they can demonstrate that they have learned this material. Include a project for an outside audience: perhaps an explanation of a confusing principle for a high school class, a video, a field research project--anything that is a real problem not yet solved with a real audience other than you. These projects should take up most of the course time but should employ the concepts learned or available in the texts or manuals. Once every two or three weeks stop and have the class develop (with your guidance) an assessment instrument to evaluate their learning. Then let everyone (including you) take that test and grade one another.

A learning community should be an opportunity for us to learn as well as for our students to learn. If we are learning with them, we are part of their community and they are part of our academic community as well. What more can we hope for?

**Newt Smith, English**

*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 "Learning Communities: Chaos or Cooperation?" by Newt Smith,  
3/1/01

As a freshman this year, I was, at registration, presented with the option of participating in a learning community. I declined the option, and I would like to tell you why. Dr. Will Keim, one of Western's more recent guest lecturers, described in one of his speeches the difference between a collective and a community: a collective, he said, is a loose association of persons taking part in social activities while a community is a series of interpersonal relationships based upon mutual respect and compassion. A collective is pleasant and diverting but relatively shallow in comparison with a community. Humans stand in deep, fundamental need of community, and are, with rare exceptions, almost always forced to accept the collective as a substitute. Of no one is that more true than of the average college freshman. The true community functions as a family, and the overriding problem of my generation is that either through self-alienation or circumstances beyond our control, the majority of us do not know a "functional" family from a hole in the ground. And whether students are willing to admit it or not, they are searching for the things they lack (like a family) and will respond to such things as fill that need--especially if they don't have to call it by those names.

I did not join a learning community because I did not want to be disappointed; I did not want to walk into the experience ready to have real relationships only to find that the majority of my fellow students were waiting for the dumb meeting to be over so they could do something else and that the professor was subtly checking his watch because he wanted to get home to his family. Now that I know a little bit more about the learning communities, I am aware that this is hardly a universal scenario, but I doubt I would be mistaken in calling it a common one.

Because of my convictions on this subject, I am delighted with Dr. Newt Smith's article and I am especially pleased with his apt and elegant description of the "insignificant adult." Dr. Smith defines the insignificant adult as one who attempts to "control [students] instead of guiding them." Students will perceive as insignificant any adult who presents himself as a member of their community but doesn't prove himself committed to each student, the way a genuine parent would. I agree with Dr. Smith's assertion that teachers must "personally [engage] individually with students, finding out their background, learning styles, and academic and recreation experiences." Another thing that most of you who have been teaching for any amount of time probably know is that many, even most of your students will not perceive your interest in their academic success as a true interest in their personal well being until you prove to them how the two are related. In the context of a community, this is even more essential than within a classroom environment.

I believe that mandating participation in the learning communities for next semester's freshman is a mistake. I also think I know why the faculty have received this command from on high: it is likely the conviction of the administration that if students spend their first year in the context of these groups, they will make friends and be reluctant to leave WCU. That, at least, is how I would interpret the phrase "persistence in the freshman year." This positive effect on retention may be true, but it will not contribute especially to the success of the learning communities if an active endeavor is not made to transform them into true communities. If freshman participation is mandated, the students have the right to expect that the learning community experience will be the best possible way to spend their freshman year of college. If they find themselves in a stultifying, stagnant environment of low commitment from their leaders and unchallenged apathy from their fellow students, the students will not have a satisfactory experience, and it is likely that the retention problem will be aggravated by the learning community requirement. If, on the other hand, faculty are prepared to rise to the opportunity, to show active concern in a student's personal and academic affairs and to present themselves as real people--willing to become significant figures in their students' lives, then the learning communities could be the greatest thing for Western since the passing of the bond referendum.

*Brittany Harrison, Freshman, Secondary English Education*

- - -Continue - - -

**Responses to "Learning Communities: Chaos or Cooperation?" by Newt Smith,**

**3/1/01**

Dr. Smith seems to me to have struck the nail square upon the head with his article on learning communities. While the university supports these ventures as a way to promote the essence of higher education (serious thought, original ideas, inquiry, and reflection), and while we all hope that learning communities do something to solve our retention problems, what the faculty faces now is a huge challenge. Will the faculty follow Dr. Smith's advice and work on facing the current problems within learning communities? Or will the faculty continue to hammer fists upon lecterns, speak above rowdy classes, and in some cases give up hope for learning?

I'll be frank: I am a student. I have no letters to append behind my name. My experience with higher education has been limited to my four semesters here at Western. And many of you might dismiss what I am about to say simply because I am young, idealistic, and surely have no idea what I'm really talking about. But I feel that the faculty must make the decision to effectively solve problems in learning communities. There is no other answer. Individually, the students have little power over how learning communities will work. Our administration has made the choice for all freshmen to live in a learning community. So how can you help us solve these problems? I challenge you, as a student to the faculty, to challenge me. I challenge you to care about me. I challenge you to eat dinner with me. I challenge you to light my curiosity on fire. I challenge you to set me on a course of thought that will lead me to life-changing conclusions. I challenge you to fulfill my expectations of a real university.

Maybe twenty years ago, higher education might have been different. I wouldn't have had to ask you to challenge me. I would have come to college as a self-motivated being, and I would have addressed my own problems with my own personal discourse. However, we live in a society where the average duration of a shot in a movie is 8.4 seconds, where we need medicine to help us focus, and where the average student has been trained to slouch in front of a television, passively wasting brain cells. Again, we can either complain about this or we can take measures to deal with it.

The problem will not go away, and your choice is to deal with it or to ignore it. Most of you have doctoral degrees in your field, and most of you had to display a superior level of thinking and problem solving to attain your degrees. I respect you and admire you. I hope one day to join you. Like you I hope to better our society through higher education. But if we truly want to better our university through learning communities, we must not ignore the problems associated with them. Please, as a student who truly wants our university to succeed, address the problems in learning communities. Challenge and love your students. Pay attention to how Chancellor's Distinguished Teachers instruct. Take a course yourself and feel how it is to be a student once again. Collaborate with one another to gain new ideas on how to handle these problems. Be the community of scholars that represents a university.

Thank you in advance for your time, your energy, and your compassion about my education.

***James Hogan, Sophomore, Secondary English Education***





# Faculty Forum

*From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning*

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 13, No. 7

April 1, 2001

## **Student Learning is a Faculty Problem**

Chris Argyris has been writing for years about why organizations cannot learn. He argues that organizational members, although competent and intelligent, make sure they do not formally talk about anything important. They develop kabuki-like routines that create the illusion important matters are being addressed when, in fact, issues fundamental to organizational learning are carefully and skillfully ignored. Members know what the deep issues are but believe it is inappropriate to raise them. Furthermore, it is against the rules to acknowledge the fact that critical issues are not discussed. Argyris calls this a "double bind."

Today, we wish to break the "double bind" and raise one of these "undiscussable" issues: that student learning at WCU is generally unsatisfactory because the students don't spend enough time engaged in the learning process, particularly out-of-class. But the problem is not the students; the problem, and the solution, is with the faculty (see Willimon and Naylor's 1995 The Abandoned Generation for a discussion of the responsibilities of faculty and administrators). Students at Western do not develop their potential to learn because our faculty enables dysfunctional student behavior. As a faculty, we do not enforce standards regarding college-level work. Some faculty permit students who do little to no class preparation to succeed. Faculty reward unprepared students and frustrate the high performers who prepare well for class and are ready to move deeper into course material. In general, we often "dumb down" classes and outside assignments, require minimal writing, accept poor writing, use evaluation methods that test only short term memory, and conduct class so those who have not read might pass the course. Most egregious is that we, as a faculty, turn a blind eye to this less than professional behavior, which is characteristic of the double bind.

The authors have gathered information to support these assertions. The historical rule of thumb is that students should spend two to three hours preparing for each hour of class time. But institutionally gathered, self-reported data from students enrolled in WCU General Education courses indicates that no more than one hour is spent working outside of class on each course. General Education students are working less than 20% of the time necessary to perform at the college level, and upperclassmen do not appear to be substantially different. Through our own experience and through conversations with faculty at different experience levels, across disciplines, across colleges, and at all course levels, it has become clear that students consistently attend class underprepared and that total lack of preparation is not unusual. The persistent failure of students to spend appropriate time engaged in intellectual work has been well documented here and elsewhere for over two decades. Lack of engagement over a period of time results in a cumulative deficit of knowledge and skills, both within courses and eventually across the curriculum. While we may notice that individuals fall further behind in our particular courses, the gravest consequence is that students generally do not develop the habit or ability to engage in intellectual work. Simply put, our students are not learning how to learn! While we as faculty can offer the students subject matter knowledge, can structure learning opportunities, can provide clarification and can lend support, we obviously cannot learn for our students. They have to learn how to do this for themselves and we are not helping them do it. They are not "mindful" or learning how to learn.



We are well aware that problematic learning behaviors are typical of university students nationally, but this does not mean we cannot develop a unique solution for Western. Enrolling students with higher SAT scores will not solve the problem. Current Western students are quite capable of engaging in serious college-level work; they simply do not know how to. Many are not even aware of their potential.

Why do we as a faculty enable dysfunctional student behaviors? Specific reported reasons include the fear of getting poor student evaluations, of not getting a merit raise, or of not getting tenure and/or a promotion. But the reward system can be changed through the development of a new reward system focused on student learning. Student evaluation forms and Annual Faculty Evaluations can be changed to assess student learning rather than faculty behaviors. Others argue that the Chancellor wants us to enhance retention and that to be more demanding of students will be harmful to retention efforts; others simply say, "I don't want to work that hard." Indeed, serious efforts to change student behaviors entail hard work, consume much time, and are not formally rewarded. However, is it not inherent in our professional behaviors as scholars and educators to rise above the extrinsic reward system and do what we understand to be the right thing? Is there not some minimal level of serious intellectual work that must be done for a meaningful college education? If facilitating such student efforts is not the faculty's job, whose is it?

To help students develop the appreciation for and capability of doing intellectual work, the faculty must interact differently with students and this may mean doing the right thing despite the external reward system. How might the faculty change the way it interacts with students? Reread Newton Smith's March 1, 2001 *Faculty Forum* essay on learning communities (particularly paragraphs six and seven) and the subsequent student responses. The faculty must engage in more student-centered learning behaviors, which may entail learning what student-centered learning really means and how we might go about it. Then we must begin by enforcing college-level standards and helping students learn how to achieve them.

We will have a new freshman class in the fall and our new Liberal Studies curriculum will be in place, but the broader academic context for these students will essentially remain unchanged. We must help *all* students develop appropriate study habits and a sound work ethic. To do so we must acknowledge that what we have been doing is not working (like we did with General Education). The faculty must break the "double bind" and recognize the self-imposed behaviors which prohibit us from publicly exposing existing problems. We must be willing and able to discuss, at a deep level, the previously undiscussable. Are we ready to admit, in a public forum, that we are not challenging students effectively? Are we willing to face our responsibilities for the general failure of learning at WCU? We can do this only through true dialogue, which is very different from the formal discussions and forums we typically have at Western.

Both of us have facilitated dialogues at professional meetings, primarily based on Peter Senge's (1990) methodology. With the help of the Faculty Center, we are willing to conduct dialogues here early next fall. But will the faculty come? Can we, as a faculty body, discover creative ways to resolve the difficulties and deficiencies of student learning? The alternative is to continue to pretend we are educating the vast majority of our students when we clearly are not.

#### **Bill Kane and Terry Kinnear, Management**

*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 "Student Learning is a Faculty Problem" by Bill Kane and Terry Kinnear, 4/1/01

I have mixed reactions to Bill and Terry's pointing the finger of responsibility at faculty for "the general failure of learning at WCU." I understand their arguments and agree that we (faculty and staff) could challenge students more effectively. But I disagree with the authors' assertion that there is a "general failure of learning" at Western. Numerous students I have taught and counseled have blossomed and celebrated their intellectual and emotional growth while here. But I do agree with Bill and Terry's tacit thesis: Individuals can and do make the difference.

Yes, I know first hand WCU's Culture-of-Silence Rule #1: "It is against the rules to acknowledge the fact that critical issues are not discussed." I agree that "true dialogue" on the "previously undiscussable" needs to take place. Perhaps that dialogue needs to include changing the reward system, as the authors suggest, to be focused on student learning (or has that "dialogue" already taken place and the system continues to reward faculty behaviors that actually take time away from good teaching? Hmmm. . . .). True, good educators "rise above the extrinsic reward system" and teach well because it's the "right thing" to do. But is there not some parallel here? Are the authors expecting our students to rise above non-challenging classes and learn for the sake of learning because it's the right thing? No. The authors understand clearly and are advocating changing course evaluation criteria and approaches to teaching to assist students in their learning, just as the extrinsic reward system needs to be changed to assist faculty in their teaching.

Bill and Terry offer to facilitate discussions, to help us discover "creative ways to resolve the difficulties and deficiencies of student learning." Having experienced the Western Ways, they ask wisely, "But will the faculty come?" I ask the parallel: would students in "dumb downed" classes come?

Change is hard--cultural change even harder. Individuals can and do make the difference.  
Thanks Bill and Terry.

*Chris Gunn, Counseling & Psychological Services*

Kinnear and Kane state that though as faculty we can "offer the students subject matter knowledge, can structure learning opportunities, can provide clarification and can lend support, we obviously cannot learn for our students. They have to learn how to do this for themselves and we are not helping them do it." May I pass along the words from Vincent Tinto, whom I heard speak at a recent conference. A faculty member asked Tinto what to do with students who didn't have the skills to pass her course. He answered quite frankly that we (the university, and the teachers) have a "moral obligation" to assist the students whom we accept. In other words, if we let the students into Western, if by accepting them we signal to them that they are up to our standards, then we MUST, as Kinnear and Kane both suggest, enable them to learn in our community.

*April Lewandowski, English*

I want to thank Bill Kane and Terry Kinnear for the issues they raised in "Student Learning is a Faculty Problem." Their Forum piece was thoughtful, provocative, and, for me, personally disturbing because of the questions the article generated regarding my own attitudes toward student learning. I have always told myself that no matter how much I care, no matter how much I try--and I do care deeply and I do try earnestly--there will always be students I cannot reach. And you all know the ones of whom I am speaking: the student, for example, who consistently is late to class, who frequently

- - -Continue - - -

**Responses to "Student Learning is a Faculty Problem" by Bill Kane and Terry Kinnear, 4/1/01**

falls asleep in class, who comes to class unprepared, and so on. These are the students who frequently "slip between the cracks" in my classes and, I suspect, in others. They are the ones it would be so easy to give up on. After all, we say, they are adults; they can choose how they want to spend their academic years. Well, this simply won't do.

It is easy, it is a great joy, to teach those who come to class every day, those who are always alert and always prepared--and we should never neglect them. But being a teacher is not about teaching only one type of learner and not the other. My contract did not say that I would teach only the conscientious and gifted, and no other. I did not become a teacher to teach only those who, if I am truthful, require only my guidance and encouragement to succeed and not those who require all my skills and patience and understanding if they are to succeed. It is our ethical and moral responsibility to educate all our students to the best of our ability so long as they are students at Western Carolina University.

So Terry and Bill, please do conduct dialogues in the fall based on faculty responsibility in student learning--and sign me up.

***Gayle Miller, English***

Bill and Terry, with all due respect, your diagnosis and prescribed treatment for what ails WCU student learning could not be more wrong. You make it clear that the central issue to you is that students do not spend enough time preparing for *classes*. I suggest the real central issue (if there is such a thing) associated with student learning stems from faculty insistence that student learning only takes place via courses. In fact, I submit that students spend far too much of their time preparing for classes and not enough in genuine learning activities. (excerpt; full text to follow on May 1)

***John W. Moore, Communication and Theatre Arts***





# Faculty Forum

*From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning*

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 13, No. 8

May 1, 2001

## Students As Clients

I disagree with Bill Kane and Terry Kinnear's April 1 Faculty Forum opinion piece, "Student Learning is a Faculty Problem." With all due respect, I feel that their diagnosis and prescribed treatment for what ails WCU student learning could not be more wrong. They make it clear that, for them, the central issue is that students do not spend enough time preparing for *classes*. I suggest the real central issue (if there is such a thing) associated with student learning stems from faculty insistence that student learning only takes place via courses. In fact, I submit that students spend far too much of their time preparing for classes and not enough in genuine learning activities.

Rather than taking part in "facilitated dialogues. . .based on Peter Senge's (1990) methodology," as they advocate, I believe we should read and heed the advice of Roger C. Schank and Chip Cleary, in *Engines for Education* (1995), who argue that schools are troubled because they have institutional goals rather than student goals. Here are some of the **mistakes** they identify that are made by educational institutions:

1. Schools act as if learning can be dissociated from doing.
2. Schools believe they have the job of assessment as part of their natural role.
3. Schools believe they have an obligation to create standard curricula.
4. Teachers believe they ought to tell students what they think it is important to know.
5. Schools believe instruction can be independent of motivation for actual use.
6. Schools believe studying is an important part of learning.
7. Schools believe students have a basic interest in learning whatever schools decide to teach them.
8. Schools believe students will accomplish things only by having grades to strive for.
9. Schools believe discipline is an inherent part of learning.

Schank and Cleary propose that we add students to curriculum committees and recognize the following "Student Bill of Rights" to "sum up the real issues in education":

1. **Testing:** No student should have to take a multiple-choice or fill-in-the-blank test.
2. **Real-Life Skills:** No student should have to learn something that fails to relate to a skill that is likely to be required in life after school.
3. **Memorization:** No student should be required to memorize any information that is likely to be forgotten in six months.



4. **Goal Clarity:** No student should be required to take a course, the results of which are not directly related to a goal held by the student, nor to engage in an activity without knowing what he can expect to gain from that activity.
5. **Passivity:** No student should be required to spend time passively watching or listening to anything unless there is a longer period of time devoted to allowing the student to participate in a corresponding active activity.
6. **Arbitrary Standards:** No student should be required to prepare his work in ways that are arbitrary or to jump through arbitrary hoops defined only by a particular teacher and not by the society at large.
7. **Mastery:** No student should be required to continue to study something he has already mastered.
8. **Discovery:** No student should be asked to learn anything unless there is the possibility of his being able to experiment in school with what he has learned.
9. **Defined Curriculum:** No student should be barred from engaging in activities that interest him within the framework of school because of breadth requirements imposed by the curriculum.
10. **Freedom of Thought:** No student should be placed in a position of having to air his views on a subject if the opposing point of view is not presented and equally represented.

We need to encourage and reward the non-classroom learning activities of our students. Let's give up our arrogance in assuming that only faculty can design learning goals and that such goals can only be met through mandated courses and teacher-prescribed work. Instead, we should devote our time and energy to helping students obtain credit, recognition, and assistance as they pursue their learning goals. We need to begin considering our students as adult business clients who pay us to consult with them about learning goals, propose solutions for them to consider, and then help them meet goals they select.

The problem is the unwillingness or inability of faculty to share learning decision making with the very students they are supposed to serve. Students will survive and learn, with or without us. The far greater danger is that faculty are becoming more and more irrelevant to the learning process.

Spend some time with Schank and Cleary.

### **John W. Moore, Communication and Theatre Arts**

*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*

**Special Edition Responses to "Students As Clients" by John W. Moore, 5/1/01**

*Since we have had several provocative responses to John Moore's May 1 Faculty Forum piece, we have decided to run a special issue of our notes & quotes response page.*

Please check on your distribution of the Faculty Forum. Yesterday I got one that obviously had been mailed back in the 60's. The emphasis on "relevance" was nostalgic and worth a reminder. But the severe anti-intellectualism of the piece was a little much even for a boomer from the Sgt. Pepper days who once believed you can't trust anyone over 30 and that if it isn't relevant NOW, it is of no value. Grace Slick is right--there isn't much sadder than a 55-year old rocker up on stage. Bill and Terry were right too. Our students do not read, write or think enough and it is our fault.

***Bruce Henderson, Psychology***

It was an interesting juxtaposition on May 1 between John Moore's message and Newt Smith's. I am much more attracted to the collaborative, positive, growth-oriented perspective from Newt than the self-centered, negative, damned-if-you'll-teach-me-anything-I-decide-I-don't-need-to-know view that John shares. Not that Schank and Cleary don't make some good points about the need to loosen up some of our teaching techniques and engage students in the process, but their "Student Bill of Rights" seems to me to flirt with anarchy in the classroom.

***Sharon Jacques, Nursing***

John Moore argues that Schank and Cleary's assessment of the problems of higher education is more valid than Kane and Kinnear's. This is disturbing, primarily because Schank and Cleary's point of view seems so extreme. Many faculty expend considerable effort to make learning more student-centered. However, this practice does not generally go so far as to assume that students are, or in fact should be, nothing more than "adult business clients who pay us to consult with them about learning goals," as Schank and Cleary apparently assert. There are many flaws with this reductive "business" model.

1) Our younger students are not adults. This is not my judgment but national law: the United States does not allow anyone to drink before the age of 21 (in theory, at least), and does not allow people under 21 to act as adults in legal, financial, or contractual matters. Young people are, some would argue, actively discouraged from adult behavior in social or personal matters. Because they are not treated as adults by national law and custom, it seems unreasonable to expect students under 21 to have their adult "learning goals" already set in stone. Indeed, as anyone can attest who has been in a classroom, a fair percentage of underage students have not yet clarified their "learning goals." Other students have simplistically clear goals which will change with maturity and shifting interests. It would be poor service to treat teenagers who are exploring their options as adult business clients, or to give them the focused vocational training which seems to be the logical extension of Schank and Cleary's philosophy (and in which purely vocational schools may have already cornered the market.) Such training may be the short-term desire of some students, but it is unlikely to serve them well when they become adults.

2) A university is not a "business" in the popular sense of that word. University education is distinct from the so-called world of business in many ways, the most important of which is that very insistence upon breadth which Schank and Cleary find so contemptible. A university asks that learning be "universal" in the belief that there is more to life than business: that our students will be asked to be not only employees but spouses, parents, friends, and citizens in a national and global community. It is with a view to these roles that the less popular breadth requirements--philosophy, anthropology, literature, environmental science--are of use. It will do our students little good to be astute businesspeople if they have never thought about their code of ethics in a logical manner, if they

- - -Continue - - -

## Special Edition Responses to "Students As Clients" by John W. Moore, 5/1/01

assume that other religions and cultures are inferior, if they hasten the destruction of our limited natural resources, or if they have never been asked to think about their lives as human beings rather than as mere clients. Eighteen-year-olds often are interested in these issues; when they are not, however, it is fair for their society to ask them to at least consider the most basic elements of their social responsibilities. Many actual businesses recognize the virtues of these breadth requirements by offering incentives to their employees to receive a university degree rather than a trade degree.

3) Students are not our only "clients." WCU students do pay for a portion of their education, but Western's in-state tuition rates are low because it is a state-funded school: that is, the tuition paid by our students and their parents is not sufficient to cover the education they receive, and the very considerable remainder is borne by the taxpayers. Thus, students not only pay for their education, but in a real sense are paid to receive it. The state--our local society--offers this pay not from a generous wish to make individual business careers more profitable, but from the conviction that it benefits us all to have students who are better educated: students who give thought to their choices, who are familiar with the history and nature of their culture, who have some grounding in what it means to be spouses, parents, friends, and citizens. In paying for a good portion of that education, the state has some right to insist that students learn things which may not entertain them particularly now but which nonetheless may have long-term (and sometimes intangible) applications.

Schank and Cleary have some worthwhile points (including the inclusion of students on curriculum committees). However, I hope it is clear why I believe that their business model, under the guise of treating students "more like people," actually treats them as cogs in a corporate machine. Schank and Cleary ignore the students' potential to be people independent of their business, to have more than one business in their lives, or to develop into people broader than they are at eighteen or twenty.

Schank and Cleary's actual pedagogy, at least in the abbreviated form explained by Professor Moore, is similarly disturbing. For instance, while it is undoubtedly a mistake to sever the connections between "learning" and "doing," Schank and Cleary's phrasing actually reinforces that very split when it implies that learning alone (as in "pure" research, on which applications are sometimes built years or decades later) is somehow "doing nothing." In another example, they disapprove of standard curricula, ignoring the fact that when curricula are not standard between classes and schools, students are usually the first to protest. Most surprisingly of all, they claim it is a "mistake" to believe that "studying . . . [and] discipline [are] an important part of learning." While no one would deny that there are other ways to learn than study, Schank and Cleary imply that students learn better when study is not an important part of learning, and that study is inherently unpleasant and a violation of student "rights." These are strange assertions. And it is utterly unclear whence they derive their belief that discipline will not be necessary in the business world.

Once again, there are elements of Schank and Cleary's "Bill of Rights" which seem worth consideration. However, the criteria they offer are so vague as to make the ideas in question all but useless. If assessment is no part of the school's "natural role," who will assess the learning process to decide just what information is likely to be forgotten in six months? (Also, who will arbitrate the frivolous discussions of whether a datum will be forgotten in six months or seven?) Who can speak for the goals of "the society at large," particularly when every discipline has specific requirements for which "society at large" knows and cares little? And who will decide when an activity is sufficiently related to a student goal? Students can decide, of course (and they do so now, when they select majors, minors and elective courses), but, once again, students do not necessarily know all their life goals at eighteen.

While we all share with Professor Moore the goal of making learning as relevant to the lives of students as it can be, Schank and Cleary's rather condescending view of education's "mistakes" does not really seem likely to help us achieve that goal.

*Catherine Carter, English*