

# Faculty Forum

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# Faculty Forum

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

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 14, No. 1

September 1, 2001

## On Speaking and Silence

I confess that my abiding sin as a teacher is that I talk too much. Those who know me will not be surprised. I have struggled with this problem since my earliest days as a teacher. This summer I taught a wonderful class called "War and Memory." My students and I had a great time, and because we had such a great time I felt justified in dominating every discussion. I responded to almost every student comment and elaborated on most of their points. *Mea culpa, mea culpa.*

Just before fall classes began, I attended a workshop on teaching our new freshman seminar courses and had my self-assurance rudely punctured. A seminar, one of the workshop handouts told me, should be characterized by students doing 97% of the talking. 97%! That's too lofty a goal for a hardened reprobate like me, but, shaken back to the roots of my own pedagogical beliefs, I have pledged to achieve 51% this semester. I will let the students talk just a little more than half the time and then build from there.

At the first general faculty meeting this year, I made some impromptu comments about low faculty morale and the lack of effective communication between faculty and administration. My purpose in speaking at the meeting was to call attention to what I perceive as one serious problem (among several) at the university level at WCU. It is the same problem that has cropped up in my own classroom: bad pedagogy. Too much talking from the front of the room and not enough interaction between speaker and listener. We faculty have responded just as my students often do: we have lost heart; we have become sullen and disgruntled; worst of all, we have become passive.

In his response to my comments, the Chancellor said that a massive gathering like the general faculty meeting is no place for dialogue. If he is worried that the meeting could turn into a chaotic free for all with no constructive results, I share his concern. However, by applying principles of good pedagogy, I think an orderly, invigorating discussion can be conducted with a group of most any size. I will suggest two alternate ways to run this meeting and one device for generating on-going faculty discussion of university issues. These techniques, in the classroom or in general faculty meetings, can turn passive listeners into active participants.

The first technique, called the "feedback lecture," is designed to minimize the loss of attention that afflicts any audience, regardless of maturity or commitment to the subject, after approximately 25 minutes of lecture. In a "feedback lecture," the speaker stops maybe halfway through the lecture, asks the listeners to gather in groups of three or four (people can simply turn in their seats), and then poses a question. The question should be open-ended, with no "correct" answer. The groups "buzz" for about ten minutes. The lecturer then calls them back together and solicits responses from the group. With a newly invigorated and interested audience, the lecturer may then resume, stopping again as necessary. At the end of a feedback lecture, it's helpful to pass out 3x5 cards and ask all listeners to write down what they thought was the most important thing they heard during the lecture. This provides the lecturer with immediate feedback, which can often be surprising.

An alternative to the feedback lecture is not to lecture at all but to expect the audience to assemble having already read the material to be covered. In the case of the general faculty meeting,



the Chancellor could disseminate copies of his speech in advance. Let the faculty read this address, mark it up, highlight it, and bring it to the meeting. After brief introductory remarks, break into small groups (as above) and assign a specific task. The simplest option might be for the Chancellor to ask the groups to comment on his address, but this approach may be a bit too unfocused. To organize the groups a bit more tightly, the Chancellor could ask each group to come up with one question, based on his address. This would take 7-10 minutes, leaving plenty of time for the Chancellor to hear and respond to a number of these questions. A still more focused approach would be for the Chancellor to identify four or five key themes and assign the small groups at random (number them off) to examine a single theme, coming up with their own response or further questions. This might require closer to twenty minutes but would still leave ample time to share the small group responses and hear the Chancellor react to them.

These practices would involve the faculty in the conversation about the difficulties the university faces and the direction the university should go. Most issues are clearly not solely the domain of the administration or the faculty but the joint concern of both. By including faculty in these discussions in a meaningful way, administrators might convince more people that faculty voices and opinions are valued and respected.

Some administrators might respond that the faculty may always email their responses to the appropriate agency directly. This is true, and the Chancellor is generally good about answering his email. The problem here is two-fold: first, I suspect that many faculty feel too disempowered to avail themselves of this avenue; and second, individual communication does not allow the administration or the writer to know how many other faculty members share their concern. The problem with individual emails also is part of a very basic truth about power. Where a preponderance of power is concentrated in a few hands, only a collective voice will garner much attention, much less action.

Finally, to maintain an on-going conversation about this university, let's set up an electronic chatroom. Contributors could open a discussion of any relevant issue rather than always depending on the administration to set the agenda. A moderator would prevent the discussion "threads" from degenerating into endless wheel-spinning or personal attacks. Faculty could briefly scan the submissions at their leisure, deleting without reading whatever did not look interesting. The truly disengaged could "unsubscribe" altogether and not receive these emails. My hope is that if we implemented such a discussion group, the Chancellor and other administrators would keep abreast of faculty thinking and contribute themselves when moved to do so.

I feel so strongly about the need to crack the "culture of silence" that I am willing to serve as the first moderator of a university-wide chat-group. I am not so naïve as to imagine that merely opening communication will solve all of our problems, nor do I believe that lack of communication is our only or most serious difficulty. But if faculty can break free of the paralyzing affects of fear and apathy and break into the conversation that administration has been having without us, then we can get some of the other issues out into the light.

The techniques I suggest may not do much to alter the balance of power. The administration will still administer, even as I still maintain authority when I use these practices in my classroom. Nevertheless, allowing other voices to speak provides an infusion of democracy. The results can be dramatic. The passive become active, the disengaged become passionate, and what was once a tedious responsibility becomes an encounter eagerly sought. As flawed as my own classroom is, I have used these practices just enough to glimpse the possibilities. Come on, people, join me in my pledge: 51% or bust!

**Gael Graham, History**

*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. 14, No. 2

October 1, 2001

## Help Students "Search Smart" on the Internet

"Oh, that's okay," said the student politely, backing away from the Reference Desk, "I'll just get it off the Web." This, after five minutes of watching two reference librarians check several sources for the information. "Come back if you don't find it," I responded, brightly. Our students generally have the impression that, with the Internet and computers, research is now easy, and maybe this student was embarrassed for us because we couldn't answer the question immediately. Like the student who wanted current literacy statistics from a county in Ireland, "Just tell me where I can find the *2000 Census* on my computer," he suggested helpfully.

Faculty need to realize that student research skills have become even more simplistic with the availability of the Internet and the computerization of library materials. It is not enough to make challenging research assignments and assume that students know how to "search smart." Students will find help at the Reference Desk, of course; that's our job and we love doing it. But faculty can anticipate research problems and give students some basic tips about how to research using computers. The Teaching Tip that follows is a modest suggestion about how to start. Faculty should keep in mind that students need more help now that the Internet has become their main research tool. If faculty and library staff work together, keeping track of problematic student research habits, we can turn the computer revolution to great educational benefit rather than permitting it to simply add a new educational problem.

Reference librarians *love* the Web, but when students routinely come to the desk after "searching the Web for three hours," we know there's a problem. Web searching has brought about the myth of the "**Big White Box**," as it's known in library-land. The "BWB" is a search screen with one box in which to type a question that students expect will be researched in the entire WWW, in all journals, and perhaps even in all books—a meta-mega search engine. Right now the Big White Box doesn't exist, but many Web searchers don't know that. There is the belief that any search engine IS the Big White Box. People are dazzled by the size of the Web but while search engines do sort through millions of pages of documents, none searches more than about 20% of the WWW. As much information as that amounts to, it is pretty small in the total world of knowledge—and microscopic in the world of *significant* knowledge. All those personal Web pages of hot cars, cute dogs and sweet babies allow us to share our lives, but they won't help Jane Student with her academic research paper. The portion of the Web that librarians try to steer researchers to is a private area, sometimes called the **deep Web**, accessible through Hunter Library's Web page. Here you find the library's databases with citations, articles, and facts from sources that are consistently more reliable than those found on the Web at large. Even here, search results are only as good as the search, and we see some doozies.

One search string I recently found abandoned on a computer read: "coach-athlete compatibility and thlet's (sic) perception of coaching behaviors." I guessed that this student had attempted what's known as a "natural language search," where a person types an entire question into the search box. The natural language search is problematic because databases and search engines seldom support it, but searchers assume the natural language search as the default and feel



defeated when it fails. As it turned out, the words were an article title that comes up easily when "athlete's" is spelled correctly. The Big White Box will automatically cope with spelling errors but, today, spelling counts and that is **Tip #1**. I found this student's article by using "coach and athlete and compatibility" as a new search string. Using "AND" to string a series of keywords together (**TIP #2**) is essential to searching the Web and databases (unless you use AltaVista exclusively). Librarians demonstrate this technique to hundreds of classes each year, but we don't reach all students, and even the ones we reach obviously need the lesson reinforced. If faculty will remind students of this and other simple strategies as they make their research paper assignments, the knowledge will be reinforced and everyone will have fewer research headaches.

When I'm invited to teach classes, usually I play it safe and use "canned" searches in order to demonstrate specific points efficiently. But in a recent class I threw myself to the wolves and asked students to tell me their topics. Choosing one, I selected the best database available but initially had difficulty getting relevant hits. I made several attempts using different word combinations (**TIP #3**), but my result lists showed that I was off base. After 3 or 4 minutes and 5 or 6 attempts, just as students were getting impatient, my results were dead-on and I did my touchdown dance. What blew me away was a student who, after my 4<sup>th</sup> try, stopped me by saying, "Wait a minute, you keep getting 600 hits, but you only look at one or two pages of results. You could be missing something!" My reply was "I scan for relevance (**TIP #4**). If I don't see a relevant citation in a couple of pages, I move on (**TIP #5**) and work on my terminology."

Generally, students are not effective or efficient researchers—they often grab the first citation in the result list (relevant or not) OR will plug along, wading through hundreds of citations because they might miss something. It is imperative that faculty understand these problems and help us fix them. If faculty simply make assignments and wait for the results rather than monitoring the research process, they will not know what the students really need to learn. Of course, faculty themselves need to have sophisticated and up-to-date research skills. They are leading students with lots of surfing experience but few effective research skills, little basic knowledge, and varying amounts of confidence. Now is the time for students to practice finding and selecting information intelligently, not after they graduate and are on the job. Without information competencies, WCU students graduate without the ability to use information technologies intelligently in an information-saturated world. Helping students develop the critical thinking skills needed to find and recognize appropriate information is initially the business of the faculty, with librarians gladly assisting.

Some call information literacy the literacy of the 21st century. Finding, evaluating and synthesizing information are critical thinking skills necessary for employment, life-long-learning, professional development, and empowered citizenship and consumerism. If faculty and the library staff work together, keeping each aware of the challenges they present students and the problems the students encounter, we can deliver more effective learning at WCU.

### **Betsy Whitley, Hunter Library**

(For more on a similar vein, see Elizabeth Weise's *USA Today* column, titled "One Click Starts the Avalanche," at <http://www.usatoday.com/life/cyber/ccarch/cceli021.htm>.)

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# ***Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning***

**Responses to "Help Students 'Search Smart' on the Internet" by Betsy Whitley,  
10/1/01**

Betsy did a great job both with her essay and its narrative elements, and with her Teaching Tip. I am photocopying her tip page and passing it out in all of my classes, including to my graduate students in a Methods of Literary Research course.

***Jim Nicholl, English***

I second what Betsy Whitley wrote about helping students to "search smart." Research is like a foreign language, and few students have been exposed to it by the time they arrive at Western. Like any foreign language, it requires a lot of practice to master. While students are introduced to basic research in English 101, it is important that faculty reinforce them at every level.

***Dana Edge, Hunter Library***





# Faculty Forum

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

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 14, No. 3

November 1, 2001

## Let's Get Engaged

I have been teaching at WCU for nearly 30 years and this semester my students in English 101, First-Year Composition, and English 278, Intro to Film, are the best I have ever seen. However, at the start of the semester, my sophomores in English 204, The Literature of Culture, resembled a group of high school students.

As we sat around our classroom circle during the first three weeks of the course, many of these sophomores slumped in their chairs. Some even tried to sleep. Several displayed what I call the "thousand yard stare." It was very hard to draw them into conversation. My teaching style is to facilitate and encourage educational self-sufficiency—to teach effective reading, analysis, and writing. But as I tried to engage these students in August and early September, they were mostly silent and monosyllabic. One young man gestured openly in disgust over something I said. One young woman whined about demanding assignments. Generally, the written work of these students was pitifully brief, unimaginative, careless, and poorly-spelled. There were frequent "no-shows" with assignments, and the students were generally docile but uncooperative and completely disengaged. At one point I thought, "this is the worst class I have ever had at WCU."

In the first week of class, I stopped the young woman who was whining for the second straight day and said, "You're whining again, and I don't like whining." That same class period, I said out loud to the whole class, "I sense an enormous amount of hostility in this room and I'm not accustomed to it." I soon asked them to write two and three times a week on what they had read.

All summer I had been excited about this course because I had expected us to work as fellow explorers of unfamiliar, non-western literature. I had planned to use my more refined reading skills to help them understand the unfamiliar literature and then help them with their writing. But up to September 11, getting my sophomores to explore was like a trip to the dentist. The shift in the class's attitude clearly began on that unbelievable day. We were all in shock, of course, and I can't really remember what we talked about specifically, but we found a way to relate the prepared assignment to the day's events.

Then, with no syllabus to restrict us, we immediately shifted gears and our assignment on September 13 was to learn about Islamic literature. I would love to report that the positive effects were immediate, but the truth is the transformation was gradual. It took us, for example, three class periods to succeed at finding Islamic literature on the Internet, but we finally struck the mother lode—adolescent women defending their second-class citizenship and young men extolling the justice of Jihad. The day before fall break we had a debate in class on whether Christianity was superior to Islam or Islam equal to Christianity. It was the first day that I would have called truly lively. However, these students now seem to be understanding that they can respond to unfamiliar literary texts with genuine insight. They are beginning to translate that reading skill into more effective writing. They are now more "engaged." We are now no longer a high school class. We are now a legitimate college class.



Is this experience just an accident of group dynamics, or is there a problem on campus with students more and more resembling high school students? In December of last year, Millie and Malcolm Abel reported in the Faculty Forum ("Learning Communities: Are They Worth the Investment?") that Freshman Seminar courses at WCU were uncovering new discipline problems. A number of colleagues agreed in notes & quotes that "high school" behaviors and extremely poor preparation were becoming more common at WCU. This shift in student behavior and preparedness should not surprise us.

Our students come from a post-print culture. They generally do not read habitually and they have trouble reading when we force them to. It's no wonder that they are frequently not "engaged" in our reading and writing assignments. Our lives have been full of reading and abstract thinking. Their lives have been full of viewing and "interaction." We read books. They play video games. We give them books to wrestle with, but the books don't have rapidly changing images, energetic music, or automatically interactive elements. Was it any accident that my sophomore class began to change on September 11? No. Here was something they could be engaged in, something they could "interact" with. Slowly, but surely, these students became more interested in their reading because it seemed more "real." As they read about Islamic literature, they remembered the replays of the twin towers collapsing, and they knew a band called Anthrax.

What can we learn from this? First, it doesn't take an international disaster to create engagement in the classroom, but we must always think about making bridges in our courses from their world to ours. We must plan engaging assignments, even making assignments more media-oriented and more like "real-world" tasks. We can take the time to help students learn how to read, how to "assimilate" written texts and make them their own. For example, I find that many students posture when they write or respond to their reading, thinking that they must sound "academic." We can invite students to simply personalize their reading and writing, connecting whatever they study to what they already know and feel deeply about. I recently discovered a fine book called Teaching College Freshmen (1991), which is in our Faculty Center Library and which was featured on last month's "Quotes" page. The authors cite a study by the National Assessment of Educational Progress [reporting] "that high school seniors actually spend less time reading books than fourth-graders do." The authors conclude that "simply telling students to read an assignment does not provide the inducement many freshmen require to become active readers."

Faculty also need to talk to one another--in hallways, offices, and in forums like this--about our problem classes. We need to share the strategies that work or fail. We need to be unashamed of temporary failure and we must not whine. We need to actually visit one another's problem classes to lend each other emotional support. In the Faculty Center Open Classroom Program, for example, we visit to learn how other classes work. If we don't share our problems and our solutions, we are likely to work in silence and frustration, quietly assuming that the problem is insoluble.

I believe that we can succeed with this new generation of college students. Let's enjoy this new challenge together, stop complaining and blaming, and discover new ways to make learning happen even in the most difficult of circumstances. Let's get engaged.

**Terry Nienhuis, English**

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**Coulter Faculty Center**

**Faculty Forum**

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Center Resources

- Faculty Sandbox
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  - Notes & Quotes
  - Teaching Tips
- Center Library
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Students and Learning

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Vol. 14, No. 4 December 1, 2001

The University as a Learning Park--a "Playground" of Ideas

Suzanne Langer, the American aesthetician, said that every age is defined by the questions it asks. The same may be said for universities and even our classes. When we are forced to recognize that things are no longer working the way they used to, we begin asking questions. I believe we at WCU have been asking the wrong questions. Our current approach is to ask, "What are the problems?" Applying this approach to education tends to focus on quick fixes and treats the university and those within it as if they were machines with interchangeable parts. I suggest we ask instead, "What have we been doing right?"

The other day in my English senior seminar I asked "What are the most exciting learning experiences you have had in your life, and what made them so valuable?" Only two students reported experiences they had had in a classroom. Most of their peak learning experiences came from those moments when they learned to think for themselves and produce something tangible or valuable. They talked about "learning to live outside their safety zones." They spoke of the conversations that took place outside of class, over coffee. They talked about professors who "constantly asked us real questions and valued what we had to say." They wanted teachers who were passionate about their beliefs and professions but who treated them as valuable partners in the ongoing conversation of an intellectual community.

When I asked these seniors what worked in their university experience, I got a wild variety of answers, each valid and worth pursuing. The room was filled with passion and excitement. The experiences they valued most were ones where the learning was open, collaborative, experiential, and explorative. Some suggested we replace grades with juried projects because grades tended to emphasize a closed system of knowledge. Others wanted more collaboration across disciplines. Others suggested abandoning syllabi so that we had the freedom to explore topics deeply instead of focusing on covering material. Most of them had little respect for textbooks. All of them placed their highest marks on classes where the work done in class actively explored uncharted territory beyond what was in their texts.

Maybe your first response is to ask, "What's wrong with what we're doing? What's wrong with our old tried and true teaching methods? What's wrong with the students?" David Perlmutter's article, "Students are Blithely Ignorant; Professors are Bitter," in the July 27th issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education clearly emphasizes how looking for problems results in finding someone to blame for the dysfunctional university classroom. We ask what the problems are and we blame the students, TV, ourselves, the administration, the legislature, or anybody we can for what is wrong.

The same blame game has been applied to retention, pointing fingers first at the students, then the faculty, then administrators, or even to the absence of malls. The result is that people end up being defensive, devalued, and dejected, pitting us all against one another. The blame game looks for the one right answer. It tends to ignore possibilities outside the assumed framework, and it devalues experimentation, isolates individuals, and creates a timid and cautious community.

When students become more actively engaged in the learning process, instructors no longer need to grip tight to the steering wheel—the learning guides itself. Students will feel like valuable partners in an intellectual community when they experience student-centered--or better yet, learning-centered--rather than teacher-centered classrooms.



We need to stop asking "What's wrong with the students?" and start asking our students for input on their most successful learning experiences. Given the opportunity, our students are willing and able to tell us what we have been doing right.

John Seeley Brown, winner of a MacArthur award and chief engineer at Xerox, points out that the typical content delivery view of education suggests that to become a physicist you need to take in a lot of formulas and absorb a lot of experimental data. But he points out that people don't become physicists by learning formulas any more than they become football players by learning plays. Most of us recognize the limitations of the simplistic content approach to education: it misunderstands how people learn, where they learn, and when they learn. This simplistic approach tends to augment the passivity students learned in front of TV, turning them into desk potatoes. Brown says that students still learn the way most of us as children and adults learned: by hands-on activities, not through abstractions. Today's university, he says, should be like a regional learning park, an open source consortium for content and its continued renewal.

A Regional Learning Park--I like that idea because it resembles the fondest memories of my university experience. I learned as much outside of class as I did in class. I explored ideas and was nurtured by teachers, mentors, fellow inquirers, and a library. I loved science, poetry, music, art, and philosophy and could not figure out why the disciplines had to be so separate. I tried things out, reapplied ideas across disciplines, and created my own body of knowledge. The university was an adventure.

I say it's time we look around at what works for us at WCU. Think of the university as a lab, a greenhouse, or a studio where we grow and experiment with what works, what might work, and what is, first and foremost, interesting to our students and to us. Think of it as a learning park, a playground of ideas. If something excites us in our field or outside it, add it to the list of things we are willing to try. If some particular class or out-of-class activity really works, share it with others. Instead of focusing on our weaknesses, let's build a campus environment using our strengths.

Asking what we have been doing right focuses on what is working, what it feels like when everything is going well and what the key characteristics are of those top moments. This approach says, "Let's do more of what works," instead of the negative, "Let's do less of what doesn't work." This approach is unfamiliar because we are trained as problem solvers. We are used to saying we must learn from our mistakes. Rarely do we focus on learning from our successes.

So let's focus on what the university does well and look around for ways to enhance these activities. On the first day of class and every week or so thereafter, let's ask our students questions such as "What is the most exciting thing you have learned so far," and "What would make this learning experience more memorable and successful for you?" And then let's have the guts to follow through and prove to students that we hear them by making appropriate adjustments in our classroom activities.

In the words of the old Johnny Mercer song, let's "Accent the positive, eliminate the negative, and don't mess with Mr. In-Between." WCU: the Learning Park. WCU: A Community of Learners. WCU: Propagating New Ideas. WCU: We're Painting the Future....You get the idea.

Newt Smith, English

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# ***Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning***

**Responses to "The University as a Learning Park," by Newt Smith, 12/1/01**

Newt, I've just read your 12/1 essay. . lovely, exciting, energetic, sound observations and suggestions. . . Thank you for taking the time and energy to communicate them. I'm going to add the questions you posed and the way you posed them (so important, the rhetoric, eh?!) to my front-burner for spring 2002.

***Marsha Holmes, English***

I certainly agree with the major point of Newt Smith's well-crafted and reasoned essay. I had what I consider to be remarkable and rewarding success with my Freshman Seminar class in the fall semester by "accentuating the positive"--not always easy to do, either, especially in the wake of the 9/11/01 episode. Ironically, as teachers, we so often concentrate on finding and pointing out the faults, rather than on finding and praising the virtues, of our students' responses--whether in written or oral form.

***Jim Nicholl, English***



# Faculty Forum

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

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 14, No. 5

February 1, 2002

## Should Our Graduates Be Able to Read?

Can a person be well educated without being able to read? My conclusion and that of the colleagues I have polled over the years is that the answer is "no." While media and computer technology can enhance learning and is good for some types of content delivery, it cannot replace reading.

More so than ever before, our students have to be prepared to be life-long learners if they are to succeed in a world that will require them to have several different careers before they retire. Good reading skills are essential to a person's ability to "reskill" him or her self. Without well-developed reading skills, students will have little chance of long term success. Historical analysis of educational requirements in society clearly indicates that demands for literacy continually increase.

However, the literacy levels of many of our students do not seem to be keeping up. Stories are common around Western Carolina University and most other universities about students not being able to read effectively. Some of the WCU examples I have heard in recent months include students who object to foreign films with subtitles because they can't read them fast enough, a student who could read but not understand Conrad's *Lord Jim*, and students who could not do simple lab procedures by reading the instructions and following the step-by-step diagrams. There are also many complaints about students' ability to write. This is not surprising because there is a direct correlation between a person's reading ability and his or her writing ability.

One of the culprits in this lack of reading skills is "aliteracy." Aliteracy is generally defined as having the ability to read but lacking the desire to do so. Reading is a "use it or lose it" skill. People can become "intentionally illiterate" by failing to exercise their reading skills. Also, there are many levels of literacy. Simply saying someone can "read" is all but meaningless. However many students do not know what they do not know when it comes to reading. Using Mortimer Adler's terminology, the large majority of people read at a basic "entertainment" level. Reading at this level does little to educate the reader. To be truly educated requires one to read well above the "entertainment" level--to read at Adler's fourth and highest level, the "syntopical or comparative" level. At this level, the readers are able to read and analyze two or more works with different perspectives or even contrary positions and are able to form their own well-informed judgment. This oftentimes requires consulting reference tools to ensure accurate understanding of the authors' intended meanings. We seem to be seeing the results of students who have not been reading increasingly challenging materials over the course of their education and are stuck at the entertainment level.

Based on many indicators, fewer and fewer people read, especially among our younger people. Fewer than 50% of households in the USA subscribe to any newspapers, magazines or newsletters. A runaway bestseller is now defined as one that sells 50,000 copies to a population of potential readers of over 200 million people. Book titles are no longer part of our definition of "popular culture." There is not a common body of "classic" literature shared among people today.



Added to these trends are concerns about the content of the things being read. For example, while the number of magazine titles published has increased, many of these do not contain much intellectually challenging content. Also the writing in many newspapers and magazines is being written for lower and lower reading levels and often is now written at the 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading level.

It is important to note that, while a recently popular topic, aliteracy is not new. The American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research held a conference, "Aliteracy: People Who Can Read But Won't," in 1982. The conference panel was concerned about the effect our declining language skills will have on our democratic way of life. They concluded that if aliteracy was not addressed quickly, we would wind up with a small literate elite who could control the country.

If we at WCU are to fulfill our mission of producing well-educated citizens, it seems apparent that we need to put renewed emphasis on the importance of reading. All evidence suggests that we can no longer assume that our students arrive on campus understanding this importance or come equipped with adequate reading skills. Every WCU course needs at some level to be a reading course. Teaching reading cannot be the sole purview of a tutoring center or a particular academic department. Students need to be taught how to read the literature of their chosen discipline. Textbooks need to challenge the students' reading ability and not simply be easy sources of facts. Library assignments need to require students to use multiple expository sources. Faculty need to explicitly model good reading behaviors to their students. All of this may require that the university develop ways to help faculty learn how to teach reading within the context of their courses. These would be similar to the efforts the university initiated to help faculty teach computing skills in their courses.

There are many things that can be done to incorporate reading in our curricula and to enhance the reading abilities of our students. However the first step will be to make a commitment to do so. Is the university ready take the obvious and yet, in today's world, the ironically bold step of declaring that to succeed at WCU a student needs to be able to read well?

The Faculty Project Team on Aliteracy is working on assessing the level of aliteracy on campus and developing ways to address the problem at WCU. If you would like to be involved, please contact Bil Stahl at Hunter Library.

***Bil Stahl, Hunter Library***

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# Faculty Forum

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

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 14, No. 6

March 1, 2002

## Some Thoughts Regarding Retention

At the end of the 2001 Fall semester, 20% of WCU first-time freshmen had a GPA below 2.0--the minimum required to graduate. About 12% of our freshman class were put on academic probation and 7% were suspended. But moderately poor academic performance is not an insurmountable problem for individuals who are at the end of their freshman year. After all, they have roughly six more semesters to mend their ways. However, the problem looms respectively larger for sophomores and juniors as they have fewer chances to "make the grade." Seniors have essentially run out of time.

This illustrates a relationship that most college faculty members are aware of--the more hours a student has earned, the harder it is for him or her to increase his or her GPA. Take the extreme case of Hypothetical John, a senior at Southern U, who shows up at the office of his advisor, Professor Smith, with his application for graduation in hand. The good news is that John has completed 112 credit hours and is eagerly looking forward to a May graduation and a quick celebratory trip to Cancun before taking his rightful position as a supervisor in his dad's landscape architecture business. The bad news is that it will be impossible for John to graduate in May. After looking over John's transcript, Smith frowns and notes that John did not do well last semester. Smith does a little quick arithmetic and determines that in his 16 remaining hours, it is mathematically impossible for John to raise his GPA to a 2.0. Thus, come May, it is more likely that John will be mowing lawns for his dad than sipping margaritas on a Mexican beach--even if he has a stellar final semester.

Could this happen here? The answer is probably not. A university's probation/suspension policy can be thought of as how deep a hole of academic difficulties should we allow a student to dig him or her self into and still have a reasonable prospect of "refilling it," that is, of recovering academically in time for graduation. In John's case, the university failed him by letting him dig a hole that he had no possibility of filling.

John would probably have been protected at WCU because of our requirement that a student's minimum GPA increases as the number of hours he or she has completed increases. This policy is outlined on page 56 of the undergraduate catalog, which includes a table for determining minimum acceptable GPA's. For example, according to the table, to stay at Western a student needs a GPA of .999 at the end of his or her freshman year, 1.45 at the end of his or her sophomore year, and 1.82 at the end of his or her junior year. At WCU, John would probably have been put on probation and, eventually, suspended long before his senior year.

The WCU suspension policy is rigorous--particularly for first semester freshmen. Relaxing this policy would, at least in the short run, increase our retention rate, which, as we all know, is near the bottom of UNC system universities. Because our retention rate is often compared with our 14 sister schools (excluding the School of the Arts), it is instructive to make a careful cross-campus comparison of academic suspension policies. Surprisingly, this analysis reveals that WCU has some of the most stringent suspension criteria in the North Carolina system. For example,



1. WCU is nearly alone in our policy of suspending freshmen after a single semester. (Indeed, at seven of the UNC system schools, the minimum GPA requirement does not start until the student has completed at least 24 hours.)
2. To continue past the freshman year (29 hours), a WCU student needs a GPA of 1.45. Only four other universities in the system have a required GPA this high early in the student's career.
3. To continue past the sophomore year, a WCU student needs a GPA of 1.82. Only one other school requires a GPA this high.

In short, mathematically, it is easier to flunk out of WCU than almost any other university in the UNC system. That is, the GPA "bar" is higher at WCU than it is at ASU, UNC-A, NC State, and Chapel Hill.

There are two primary reasons why students don't return to WCU. Some don't come back because they don't want to; others don't come back because we don't let them. Our retention rate would instantly improve if we simply lowered our minimum GPA requirements for freshmen to match those of other UNC system schools.

Is this a good idea? I think not. Indeed, I believe that WCU's probation/suspension policy is, in fact, superior to that of most of our sister institutions. Among its strengths are: (a) it gives a clear definition of good academic standing; (b) it identifies early in their college careers the students who have academic problems; (c) it leads students experiencing academic difficulty back to good standing in an incremental, progressive, and systematic fashion; and (d) it has aspects of forgiveness that serve as an incentive and help errant students to recover good academic standing. While lowering the GPA requirement might increase our retention ranking, ultimately we would not be doing our students any favors.

Currently, the Council on Student Affairs is proposing changes in our probation/suspension policy that would alter it to more resemble the policies of our sister institutions. In a single, bold move, we can make our retention numbers look better. Some might call it creative accounting, but I call it a mistake. We already have a fine, if stringent probation/suspension policy. When the Council's proposals go before the Faculty Senate for approval, these issues should be carefully weighed.

While I support the effort to help freshmen return to good academic standing through our retention /suspension policy, I hope that our basic policy is not changed. One standard that remains high at WCU is our GPA requirement. While our GPA bar may be higher than that at many other institutions, it meets the needs of a variety of stakeholders, including not only the students but also their parents, state taxpayers, and the university's faculty. To lower our retention standards now would be a mistake.

***Ralph Willis, Mathematics, and anonymous others***

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# Faculty Forum

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

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 14, No. 7

April 1, 2002

## **Retention, Recruiting, and Faculty Salaries**

Over the past five years, the faculty, staff, and administration at WCU have devoted considerable time, energy, and financial resources to recruiting and retaining students. But WCU is also faced with another recruitment and retention problem--attracting and keeping excellent faculty. It has been estimated that between half and three-fourths of our first choice job candidates turned us down last year. This year, the UNC Faculty Assembly released a report comparing faculty retention rates across the state universities. The results are disturbing. In 2000, the proportion of resignations among WCU tenured faculty exceeded the UNC system average by 130%, and the proportion of resignations of tenure track faculty exceeded the system average by 53%. These numbers include only voluntary resignations, not retirements or non-renewals.

While there are a number of reasons for our faculty retention and recruitment problems, one factor looms large--money. This issue is not unique to WCU. Some institutions within the UNC system have addressed these problems by approaching the UNC Board of Governors for permission to raise average faculty salaries, using special supplements paid for by local tuition or fee increases. Take Appalachian State University. Last year their administration requested that the Board of Governors allow them to levy a "campus-initiated tuition increase" specifically earmarked for faculty pay increases. The effect was substantial. Whereas most WCU faculty saw a \$625 salary increase (virtually all of which was eaten up by increases in health insurance premiums), the average increase at App State was \$2,240.

What is not widely known is that last year most universities in the UNC system took the same approach as ASU. Nine of the public universities in North Carolina requested and received permission from the Board of Governors to use special salary supplements to increase base salaries. Salary increases at the six schools that did not request a supplement (WCU among them) averaged 1.1% or \$625. In contrast, pay increases at the institutions that did get the supplements averaged 2.8% or \$1700. The mean increase for each of the 15 institutions is shown in Figure 1.

Two alarming trends emerge when these data are broken down into the "Have Nots" (the institutions who got the \$625 minimum increase) and the "Haves" (those who received the supplements). First, the distribution of the additional funds is biased--the six who got only the \$625 included four of the historically minority schools (Elizabeth City State, Fayetteville State, Winston-Salem State, and UNC-Pembroke) and two of the mountain schools (WCU and UNC-A).

Second, one might expect that the colleges requesting the supplements would be those with the lowest salaries. In fact, the opposite was true. The average pre-raise salary of colleges that got the supplement was \$5,346 higher than of the six who did not. Thus, rather than ameliorating salary inequities across the system campuses, our recent salary "increase" exacerbated existing differences. It is probably unfair to compare WCU with, say, Chapel Hill or NC State. However, disparities are also increasing between WCU and the universities that Chancellor Bardo has identified as our major competitors for students (ASU, UNC-Charlotte, ECU, UNC-G). At these institutions, the average faculty member saw a pay increase of \$2,100 this year--about triple that of WCU faculty.



But salary distribution problems also extended to the allotment of available funds within our own institution. Faculty often have inadequate information concerning merit pay decisions. For example, last fall most WCU faculty members received a letter from their dean indicating that every full time WCU employee--from secretary to department chair--got the same \$625 increase. But, according to the 2001 BD 119, a public document listing all salaries, this was not the case. In the vast majority of departments, one to three members received supplements in addition to the minimum \$625. The fact is that nearly 15% of WCU faculty got more substantial raises than their colleagues. These ranged from \$1,225 to \$1,825 (mean = \$1,324). In one college, all department heads were given increases; these averaged \$2,250 over and above the normal department head supplement.

In some cases, faculty members were actually sworn to secrecy about their extra salary increase. This practice seems to be a violation of the 2001-2002 EPA Salary Resolution from the Office of the President that specifies that "Criteria for the distribution of salary funds must be clearly understood by the faculty. . . . It is critical that the faculty be engaged in the discussions of the (distribution) process and in establishing the criteria for merit within the unit."

The need to increase faculty salaries is a high priority within the UNC system; President Broad has set the long term-goal that salaries at each state university in North Carolina reach the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile of a group of selected national peer institutions. A December 1999 report by an outside consulting firm on UNC system salaries recommended that WCU faculty be given an average adjustment of \$4,992 to bring us up to a competitive level. The increase recommended for us was higher than that of any other UNC system school in our category (AAUP IIA-Without Engineering). This increase did not materialize, and the unfortunate truth is that, rather than catching up with our peer institutions, we are falling farther behind.

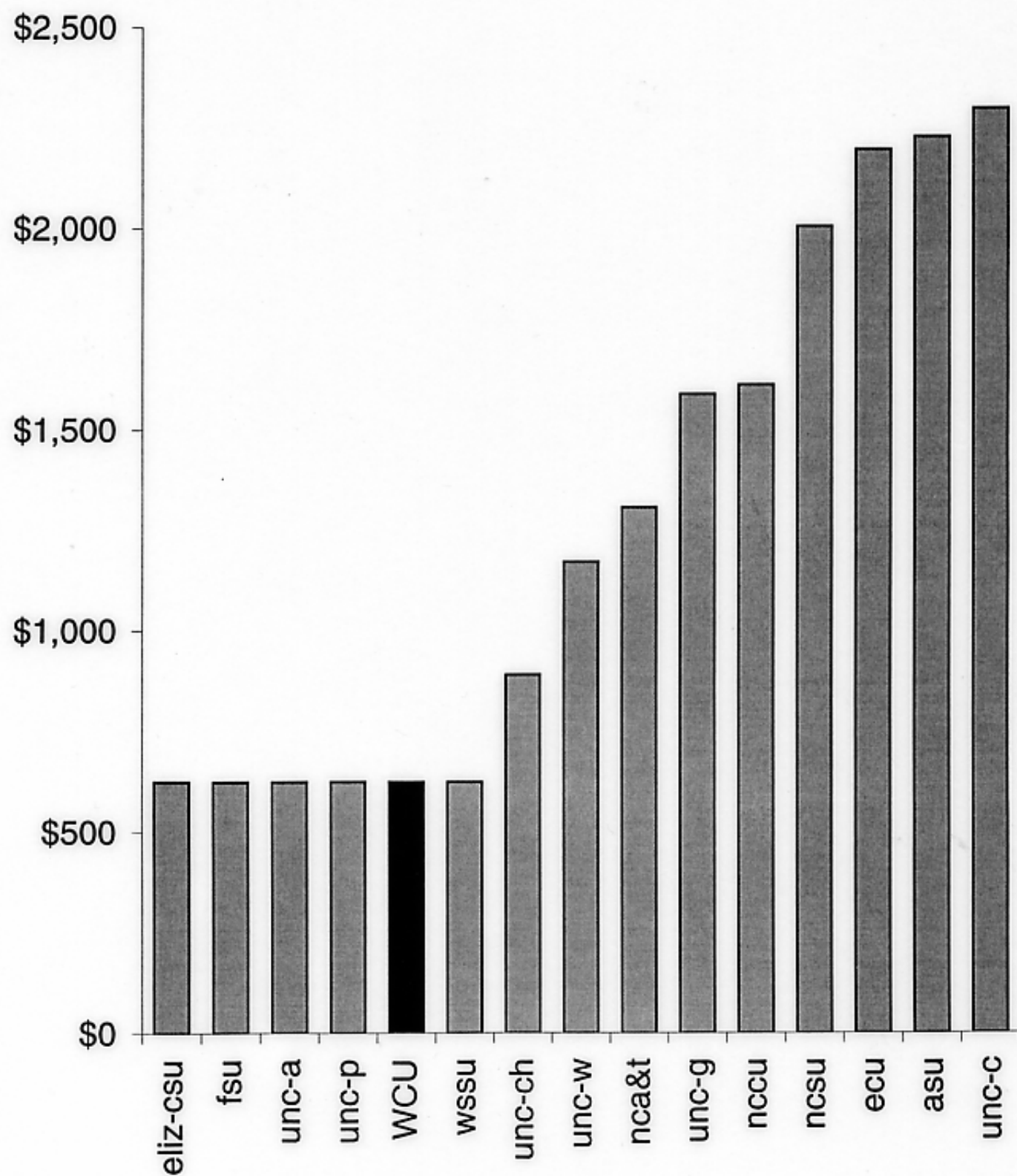
Our faculty and administration need to work together so that WCU can achieve parity with the universities with which we compete for students and faculty. As a "focused growth institution" WCU has been designated by the Board of Governors to grow by 2,700 students in the next few years. If we maintain our present 20:1 student to faculty ratio, this growth will require that we hire an additional 135 faculty members. In a talk at the University Club several years ago, Chancellor Bardo correctly noted that market forces drive faculty salaries. It is obvious that attracting and keeping new additions to our community will be a major challenge. As indicated by President Broad, we need to establish mechanisms through which our faculty can be involved in developing principles for the distribution of merit pay.

The issue of faculty salaries directly affects the quality of teaching and learning and the retention of students at WCU. Great faculty create exciting learning experiences, which improves student retention. But great faculty tend to be sensitive, proud, and imaginative people. They will not go to or stay where they feel unnecessarily undervalued. In recent years, we have experienced a brain drain of established faculty members who have chosen to abandon our campus for presumably greener pastures. Salary parity and fairness affect faculty morale and, ultimately, student retention.

### **Hal Herzog, Psychology**

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## Average 2001 Salary Increase







# Faculty Forum

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

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 14, No. 8

May 1, 2002

## **Faculty Raises for 2001-02**

There has been considerable confusion about the merit raises that were distributed for the 2001-02 academic year. Part of the confusion stems from inadequate communication from the administration, for which I wish to apologize to the faculty. In the future, each dean will send a salary letter to each faculty member outlining the process of distributing merit and equity salary increases. Part of the confusion stems from the complexity of the salary reporting process as it exists in the BD 119.

This year, every faculty member received at least \$625. This was considered to be a cost-of-living increase, not merit. Obviously, this did not cover the cost of living. In addition, anyone who was promoted to Associate Professor received an additional \$700 and those promoted to full Professor received an additional \$1,000. These have been the standard raises for a number of years and it seemed only fair to continue this. Therefore, all those promoted received one of these amounts as a form of merit pay.

In addition, it came to my attention very late in the salary process (October) that, after allocating funds for promotions, we had almost \$28,000 left that could be distributed to the faculty as merit and/or equity allocations. These funds came from positions that were used for part-time faculty and graduate assistantships and from full-time positions that were not eligible for raises (e.g., new hires). Unfortunately, we only had a few days to decide how to allocate the funds and who to allocate them to, as the salary information had to be submitted for payroll purposes.

The deans and I decided to handle merit pay the way it is always done, by reviewing the results of the annual faculty evaluation process. The deans had just a few days to review the AFE's and decide which faculty members were especially meritorious or had obvious equity issues (with the proviso that someone with an equity issue had to be meritorious, as well). We decided that merit pay would be allocated on the formula of \$600 for Assistant Professors, \$700 for Associate Professors, and \$800 for full Professors. Forty-one faculty members were given a total of \$27,800. Only 5 of the 30 academic department heads, spread across three colleges, received any of these funds. In the College of Business, the number of departments was reduced from 6 to 4. The administrative stipends were redistributed to take into account the changing sizes of the departments, without changing the total dollar amount allocated in the college. One faculty member received merit pay and promotion to full Professor. Other than him, the people receiving merit raises got \$1225, \$1325, or \$1425 (including the \$625), depending on their rank. The BD 119 is confusing in that it lumps all of the raises into one column. Therefore, those who received funds for promotion or revised stipends based on restructuring of departments could be perceived as receiving the additional merit allocations.

In regard to swearing someone to secrecy, I hope that didn't happen. I have often said that there are no secrets in a university--it is only a matter of time before everything is known. Unfortunately, some of that which is "known" is rumor or conjecture. I believe that openness helps to reduce misinformation, and, again, I apologize that we weren't proactive enough in



sharing information with the faculty. Obviously, all faculty salary information is available every year in the BD 119, but it is not the easiest document to interpret. In the future, the administration will make sure that faculty members who wish to know more about the salary process and its outcomes will not have to plow through this document unaided to find the information they need.

Let me close by saying that the Chancellor, the deans, and I take the salary problems on this campus very seriously. I received an email from Hal Herzog concerning my piece in the last Faculty Forum. With Hal's permission, I am sharing a portion of his communication. He said, in part, "I appreciate your thoughtful response to my Faculty Forum piece. As part of my research for the article, I looked at your charges to both of the Faculty Senate task forces on salary issues. . . .It is clear to me that your charges to the committees reflected a sincere desire on the part of the administration to get faculty input into salary issues . . . .As you point out, salary problems at WCU are difficult given both external and internal constraints. I am glad to see that you and Chancellor Bardo are taking the issue seriously."

I appreciate his remarks and wish to say in response that I still wish for faculty input into the merit pay process, as well as the equity issues that continue to plague us. I look forward to working with the Faculty Senate in the coming year to continue the dialogue and to search for solutions.

**Rick Collings, Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs**

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