

# 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. 18, No. 1

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## **Beyond Motivation: Engagement, Mindfulness, and Learning**

With more than 50 years of combined classroom teaching and observation between us, we have long noted that only a few students, primarily upper division undergraduates, ever get beyond what is called lower level learning. For example, in one of our courses we see students spending time and effort writing group cases, but case three is little better than case one. Most students are motivated to invest the time and energy but are unable to write a substantive case after several tries and considerable feedback. Why is that? What is missing?

The easy explanation is to blame student laziness, lack of time-on-task, and/or ability. While these are sometimes true, are laziness and lack of time-on-task cause or effect? Students may be getting frustrated because they do not know what to do to be successful at the assigned task. They spend the time and energy, they are not successful, the feedback does not help them be successful on a subsequent task, and they quit trying. A student comment that we then hear is "If you would just tell me what you want I will do it." Students who are experiencing this frustration often believe the teacher knows the right answer but just will not give it to them. They think the source of the problem is external and since they believe that the expert is supposed to tell them the answer, they blame the outside source who they perceive as making things more difficult rather than easier. They do not seem to see "learning how to learn" as significant.

What students do not recognize is that to develop into thinkers and problem identifiers/solvers they must do significant higher order thinking. While the teacher can set the stage with a variety of approaches, if higher order learning is to take place the student herself/himself must go beyond the immediate task and use the assignment to explore and develop that which is not obvious. Two classic educational researchers, Bloom (1956) and Perry (1970), discuss these higher levels of learning in such terms as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. In thinking through what is going on and what is missing in the students' learning process, we offer this linear and admittedly recursive model:

Motivation → Engagement → Mindfulness → Learning



We believe that the motivation to develop higher order thinking skills must be intrinsic rather than extrinsic or dependent on external sources. The student must step out from behind all teachers' voices and begin to develop her/his own voice. This responsibility is threatening and difficult, but if the student is not self-motivated there will not be sufficient drive to overcome the inherent discomfort of learning. As difficult as it is to get to self-motivation, it is only the first step.

Engagement and mindfulness are therefore essential to our thinking about teaching and learning. Students must learn to engage their intellectual abilities with the task at hand and its context, making sense of facts and theories at their disposal, engaging in critical thinking.

But engagement is not simply physical presence. Students are not engaged if they simply show up at some activity. Engagement is exploration, confidence, purpose, and taking responsibility for learning. We believe that engagement entails active reading and playing with the hypothetical. It is enquiry, questioning, comparing and contrasting, and distinguishing subtle differences. It is about persistence.

Mindfulness, according to Langer (1989) is creativity, openness, awareness of multiple perspectives, a process orientation rather than an outcome orientation. It is attentiveness and contextualization. The learner must go beyond the "rules" and not accept them as constraints. Mindfulness is also paying attention to one's own role in, or impact on, the context. The mindful learner is self-aware and does not allow himself/herself to be caught up in his/her perceptual biases.

Learning is change, mostly changes that the learner makes in him or herself. The learner knows more about what, how, and why regarding a particular subject. This is not something that one person can do for another; teachers can only facilitate the process by which the learner does it for him or herself.

What can faculty at Western do to increase the likelihood that students will become more engaged and mindful? We must start by asking the right questions. There will be no easy answers and the solution is not in technique. Robert Leamnson, in Thinking About Teaching and Learning, is very hopeful about educating college students but he insists that "people cannot be educated against their will. . . .learning will only start when something persuades students to engage their minds and do what it takes to learn." You can begin this crucial process at Western by responding to this Forum piece and offering your suggestions for persuading students into engagement and mindfulness.

**Terry Kinnear and Bill Kane (Emeritus), Management and International Business**

*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 "Beyond Motivation: Engagement, Mindfulness, and Learning" by Terry Kinnear and Bill Kane, 9/1/05**

I applaud Terry Kinnear and Bill Kane's invitation to begin a conversation on engagement, mindfulness, and learning. Dr. Kane and Kinnear have challenged us to start "asking the right questions." I reflected on this charge as a faculty member and came up with some questions for myself. To what degree do I . . .

Accept responsibility for what happens in my classroom?

Make my expectations clear through examples and rubrics?

Move beyond knowledge and comprehension to assessments that require students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate?

Continually work with my colleagues to examine my own practice?

Convey a tone for students of what Ted Sizer calls "unanxious expectation" – "I am here to support you but I expect much of you"?

**Anna T. McFadden, Educational Leadership and Foundations**

I enjoyed reading Terry and Bill's article in the Forum; many of their comments "struck a chord," i.e. they were consistent with my experiences here at WCU as well as at other universities. I've posted on my office door a quote by Joshua Reynolds, an English painter: "There is no expedient to which a man will not resort to avoid the real labor of thinking." Many students don't seem self-motivated to "overcome the inherent discomfort of learning." I especially appreciated the comment about learning as something that can't be done for students, i.e. teachers can facilitate the process, but students must learn for themselves. Many students at both the undergraduate and graduate level seem more outcome-motivated (what grade will I earn?) than process-motivated (what will I learn?). More importantly, they think that grades have a one-to-one correspondence with amount of learning. Their engagement in learning (as defined in the article) is lacking, particularly in terms of taking responsibility for both successes and failures.

If I had an answer to the question about what faculty can do to increase the likelihood of students becoming more engaged and mindful, I'd be a rich woman, i.e. I'd charge five bucks a head to share such wisdom. I don't have an answer to that question; however, I think one of the right questions to ask is how students who demonstrate engagement and mindfulness can be evaluated and rewarded for taking those first steps that reflect self-motivation for learning. I don't know the answer to that question either, but apparently neither do those who have far more expertise than I have to offer. What I do know is that during my many years as a student I had great teachers who facilitated my learning and some not-so-great who didn't; however, learning occurred in both instances. I guess that reflects the comments that "the solution is not in technique" and "learning will only start when something persuades students to engage their minds and do what it takes to learn."

**Beverly Jacobs, Communication Sciences and Disorders Program, Speech and Hearing Center Director**



## **Responses to “Beyond Motivation: Engagement, Mindfulness, and Learning” by Terry Kinnear and Bill Kane, 9/1/05**

I'd like to thank Terry Kinnear and Bill Kane for their thoughtful essay on learning. I like their proposed model that leads from motivation to engagement to mindfulness to learning, but it strikes me that motivation is still the major hurdle. Well, it's the first hurdle, anyway. It may be that engagement and the rest are just as difficult, but we (that is, I) so rarely get beyond motivation that we (again, I) never know for sure. So, I can't get “beyond motivation” just yet.

Maryellen Weimer addresses the issue of motivation (and beyond) in Learner-Centered Teaching when talking about faculty vs. student responsibility in the learning process. She quotes a colleague from agronomy who had his own twist on the proverb about leading a horse to water: “He said that it was the teacher's job to put salt in the oats so that once the horse got to water, it was damn thirsty.” Weimer has her own assessment of current practice, based on this concept:

In general, our instructional policies and practices do not make students thirsty. Rather, we tell students that they are thirsty – that they should be drinking. They remain unconvinced and so (mostly out of concern for them), we force the issue. We use rules, requirements, and sticks to try to hold their heads in the watering trough. Most do end up drinking, but a lot of them never figure out why water is so important. A few drown in the process. (p. 103)

This begs the question, though. We still need to know how we can motivate our students. I think that Terry and Bill are right that techniques are not the answer. There isn't a panacea. That isn't to say that new pedagogical approaches aren't helpful. They're just not enough. From my summer reading on student learning, one thing is clear to me: whatever we do, we need to be transparent. We need to explain why they need to do group work. We need to make them understand the importance of practice through homework. We must be explicit in our reasoning for that writing assignment. If we try a new technique (and I am willing to try anything that might work), we should explain to them why we think this will enhance their learning experience.

This applies to content as well. As Weimer says, we also need to be clear about “why water is so important.” This means that it's not enough to teach my computer science students about different types of data structures. I must also tell them why they need to know about these data structures. The same is true in any academic discipline.

I'm guessing that this sort of transparency will be helpful in engagement and mindfulness as well. For the time being, though, I'll be happy (and I hope my students will be, too) if I can just solve the motivation issue. Then maybe I'll see if engagement is yet another hurdle, or if it falls in place easily once I've been able to move beyond motivation.

### **David R. Luginbuhl, Mathematics and Computer Science**

Perhaps one reason for the lack of student engagement is because the goals of our classes are typically the goals of the instructor. The criteria or rubrics for an assignment are those of the instructor as well. When the instructor owns the goals, students adopt a performance orientation (what do I need to do to get an “A”) rather than a learning orientation. Performance orientations tend to manifest in lower levels of learning and students who do just what they have to in order to get by. Perhaps a start to increasing engagement, mindfulness and learning would be to engage students



**Responses to “Beyond Motivation: Engagement, Mindfulness, and Learning” by Terry Kinnear and Bill Kane, 9/1/05**

in identifying their own learning goals through an examination of why they are taking a course and what they hope to get out of it. I am not suggesting that instructors engage learners in only what the learners deem important. Rather, I am suggesting that instructors guide students in reflection regarding what they are learning, to allow students to put that in their own words and explore the importance of their own learning goals to their success in college, their intellectual lives, and their careers. Additionally, learners could collaborate in the development of rubrics for the grading of course assignments. If they are engaged in this process, the assignment may become more than what the instructor wants rather what the learner wants.

**Lisa Bloom, Human Services**

What can faculty at Western do to increase the likelihood that students will become more engaged and mindful? Read the classic, Classroom Questions by Norris Sanders. Create a WonderWeb or WonderWall display to which students are required to post and respond to each others' authentic questions and monitor to determine if students can generate the full range of higher order thinking questions themselves, absence of which may require modeling on your part. Use journaling to develop private voice; use blog postings to develop their own public writing voice; use wiki's to develop collective team voices. Engage students in using course content to address real questions that emerge from the WCU region (a form of service learning). Cheers!

**Bob Houghton, Birth to Kindergarten, Elementary, and Middle Grades Education**

Thanks so much, Terry and Bill, for raising the radical matter of motivation in learning. It's one of the most frequently raised and unresolved issues in discussions I have with past, present, and future teachers. You ask, what can faculty do to increase the likelihood that students will become more engaged and mindful? We can create a learning environment conducive to people finding intrinsic motivation and developing themselves through mindful engagement. That's not just people=students, either. In a learning environment, teacher and student both learn. We cannot motivate anybody because, as you note, learning is motivated intrinsically. We cannot persuade students to be motivated; that's just another way to say we can motivate others. Yet, again, we can design contexts in which motivation can breathe and learning occur. Your essay suggests several questions we can frequently ask ourselves to ensure we are doing engaged, mindful teaching and learning. For instance, do assignments require “playing with the hypothetical”; does feedback encourage it; does evaluation value it? If so, then we have liberated ourselves and our students from the mindless, disengaged behavior that many of them have adopted during mindless, disengaging school experiences.

Here are a couple of questions I ask myself: If I expect students to explore a question and yet am not willing to explore answers other than my current one with them, then am I asking them to fake mindfulness? If, when I evaluate their work, I could just as easily throw them a dog biscuit or a job application for a good performance, am I destroying the authenticity of engagement? Am I trying to motivate extrinsically with gold stars?

**Marsha Lee Baker, English**





# Faculty Forum

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

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 18, No. 2

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## **Student Reading Skill: Another Nodal Problem**

In *Thinking About Teaching and Learning*, Robert Leamnson locates the epicenter of teaching and learning in brain chemistry and asserts that it is not enough to lead students to use their brains; teachers must help students change neural pathways.

In his Preface, Leamnson says that effective teaching depends on "Knowing Where to Strike," and he counsels us to "find a 'nodal problem,'" or "some deficiency that blocks all the other skills we would hope to find in first-year students." Leamnson says, "my candidate for a nodal problem is language use. The typical beginning college student is marginally equipped to deal with the language in any discipline at the college level, whether in verbal discourse, reading, or writing. The language obstacle is central to all the arguments I present in this book." Leamnson goes on to focus on student writing as the most crucial nodal problem.

This is, of course, music to the ears of anyone in the English Department. We teach Composition I and Composition II to nearly all first-year students, and the skill level they bring to us from high school makes our job very difficult. For decades, we have been saying that we can't create highly skilled writers in two 15-week semesters. First, we have to break down many very counterproductive high school habits and attitudes before we can make progress, and then we have to build new habits very quickly. As Leamnson points out, creating new neural pathways in the brain is stressful, difficult, and time-consuming. To succeed in our Herculean labor, we need everyone in the university to help reinforce writing skill, if only by requiring students to write as much as possible to earn their grades in every course they take.

However, many of our colleagues are reluctant to tackle student writing, either believing that they owe allegiance first to disciplinary content, that writing instruction requires expertise they lack, or that "grading" papers would be too labor-intensive. Whatever the validity of this hesitancy to help teach writing, I believe that there might be an even more crucial nodal problem that we might all agree to focus on. Our first-year students cannot read effectively. However, I believe that our students can learn to read more effectively and that all faculty can help improve student reading skills without sacrificing course content coverage or creating excessive labor.

We all ask students to read textbooks and supplementary reading and we are frequently disappointed when they don't do the reading at all or seem to do it badly. I



believe that if our students are reading reluctantly or badly, we have a responsibility to find out why. The usual pedagogical strategy is the reading quiz—elementary recall questions that teachers consider “simple” and students often consider “simple-minded,” arbitrary, and autocratic. I’ve seen students who seem willing to risk their grade rather than knuckle under to a forced march through a reading assignment.

I am no reading specialist, but I expect that we can come up with better ideas. Let me offer some to get us started:

1. Start each class by asking students to write a three-sentence summary of their reading, perhaps on a 3 x 5 note card. This should take no more than 5 minutes. Once this assignment becomes a tradition, the students will more likely do their reading so as to not embarrass themselves. In reading their summaries, you will probably be able to tell who is faking, who has read superficially, and who has read deeply. In this process, you will enhance student comprehension of course content. The students will need some instruction in how to write an effective summary. The issue of whether or not to assign credit for this writing is another issue for us to analyze and discuss.
2. Do the same as above but make the writing a personal response, which is much easier for students, much more engaging for them, and, unfortunately, easier for them to fake. However, you should still be able to discern levels of quality in the responses, and, in sharing these levels of quality with your students, you can encourage more engaged and pertinent responses.
3. At various times either during class, or as homework, ask students to do a paraphrase of small sections of selected text. Leamnson believes that paraphrasing is a superior diagnostic and educational tool because students must reproduce an accurate account of a text’s meaning using their own words. One of the advantages of the paraphrase, according to Leamnson, is that it can be longer than the original text and does not put as much pressure on a student’s burgeoning writing skill. The expansiveness of a paraphrase might lead to less quality in student writing but more quality in student understanding.

If you have other strategies to share, send your suggestions as responses to this Faculty Forum. The byproduct of better reading is better writing, speaking, note-taking, and listening. We cannot simply assign a lot of reading and expect students to do it well. There has to be teacher intervention to get the learning process started, feedback to inspire student self motivation, and evaluation of the learning success.

**Terry Nienhuis, English**

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# *Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning*

Responses to "Student Reading Skill: Another Nodal Problem" by Terry Nienhuis, 10/1/05

In his Faculty Forum essay, Terry Nienhuis makes a profound point about the reading abilities of students. It is indeed unfortunate that so many of our students come to college unprepared to read for comprehension, and I'm sure that Leamnson would include reading as part of the nodal problem in language use. While we could complain about this sad state of affairs, we must, as Leamnson says, "play the hand we are dealt." These reading and writing (and speaking) skill sets are so critical to all of our disciplines that it is grossly unfair to ask our colleagues in English and CDTA to "fix it" with nine semester hours of Liberal Studies courses that are detached from the rest of the students' college learning. I hope nobody in English or CDTA is offended by my use of the word "detached." It's just that, as far as I know, there is no formal connection between ENGL 101/2 (or CMHC 201) and any other non-English course in the university.

Though Terry focused on reading, I am more intrigued by a statement he made about writing: "we have to break down many very counterproductive high school habits and attitudes before we can make progress, and then we have to build new habits very quickly." It would be interesting for those of us outside the English department to know precisely what those bad habits and attitudes are and what new habits need to be instilled (I can guess, but I would appreciate an English professor's perspective). To take this a step further, when those of us who teach in other disciplines attempt to work on students' writing skills, I'm guessing most of us do it independently of whatever the students learned in ENGL101/2. If I knew precisely what went on in those composition classes, I might be able to design writing experiences that reinforce the learning from those classes.

This integrative approach could actually work in both directions. Here's an interesting idea: instead of two three-hour composition courses in the first year or so, what about three (or dare I say, four) two-hour composition classes, one for each year? In each year, the writing would be more specific to the student's course of study. In this way, the integration could be more real-time and bidirectional.

As for developing reading skills, one suggestion I have is to approach how we assign readings in a more systematic manner, from simpler to more complex, thus paralleling the student's evolving grasp of language at the college level. Textbooks in general are of no help here (well, that's true at least for Computer Science), since the complexity of language in a textbook is "flat" from start to finish.

It would be better if students came to college prepared for the level of reading, writing, and speaking that we all expect. They don't. That means we as a faculty will have to take on collectively more responsibility to ensure they have the necessary communication and comprehension skills to succeed in our courses.

**David Luginbuhl, Math and Computer Science**

Thanks, Terry, for your ideas about promoting better student reading (or let's face it, promoting the students to read at all). I'll add one. I've used this system in my COUN 440: Leadership and Facilitation class for two years now. I like it and students tell me that they do as well. The course



## **Responses to “Student Reading Skill: Another Nodal Problem” by Terry Nienhuis, 10/1/05**

uses two texts, one they get through the rental system and one they buy. We use the two books back-and-forth throughout the semester. The for-purchase book is a workbook that has a series of ready-made sections called “Your Turn.” As students read, they pause at each “Your Turn” and hand-write responses to the authors’ inquiries, always aimed at getting the reader to think more deeply about the issues at hand. Because this system was already in place for the one book, I have extended it myself to the rental book. I’ve created my own “Your Turn” handout for each chapter. It’s a one-page (front-to-back) handout with questions set to particular sections of the corresponding chapter (“At the bottom of p. 32, the author states... Give an example of this in your own...”). But then all of these “Your Turns” are too much for me to read and grade. To simplify, I assign each student a number and at the start of each class session, I pull (actually I have a student volunteer pull) eight or so numbers randomly. Only those students whose number is called submit their “Your Turn” work. Students never know when their number will come up, so they must bring this reading reflection to class every session. I further encourage reading (and reflection on it) by sometimes using the “Your Turn” responses to kick-off our discussions.

### **Lisen Roberts, Human Services**

Terry Nienhuis paraphrases Robert Leamnson, “creating new neural pathways in the brain is stressful, difficult, and time-consuming,” and this is true not only for students but for their instructors. Rethinking how we teach can be excruciating. The good news is the mental work we undergo to become more effective teachers will be as beneficial for our brains as the mental work we require of our students will be for theirs. Counter to conventional wisdom, there is no more demanding or rewarding a calling than being a good teacher.

### **Barbara Hardie, Director, Writing Center**

Leamnson is talking about how human beings (not just “students”) use language. Thanks, Terry, for bringing it to our faculty’s attention. A nodal issue in faculty development, we assert, is gaining a theoretically sound, pragmatic concept of what language use is and what effects it has on curricula and pedagogy. Writing and reading are far more than skills students need to master or at least get the hang of prior to entering other academic or professional endeavors. Human beings learn through acts of writing and reading. Knowledge is constructed through use of language. Students of science learn how and what scientists write/read from other scientists. Students of history learn how and what historians write from other historians. Young entrepreneurs learn. . .and so it goes. Education and life are shot through with use of language and its learning. In our discipline, we call it rhetoric, broadly defined as the use of, and study of the use of, language. Course content cannot be completely taught or effectively learned without studying its discipline’s rhetoric.

### **Marsha Lee Baker and Liz Kelly, English**





# Faculty Forum

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

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

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## **Incorporating the Teaching of Writing into Science Classes**

For decades now, several factors have worked to reduce the average 18-year-old's ability to write effectively. Curriculum requirements have been lowered, teachers faced with rising class sizes and the demise of discipline struggle just to present the required material in the time allotted, and academically adept students get very little encouragement and validation from the mainstream media portrayals of the "cool" teenager. As Terry Nienhuis pointed out in the last Forum, it takes a concerted effort on all our parts, not just from those who teach English composition, to help our students improve their writing skills.

A course in which the entire grade is derived from exam scores produces a scallop-shaped effort curve. Most students put the minimum required effort (usually none) into the course until an exam comes around, at which point their effort increases markedly. Following the exam, their effort again drops to approximately nil, until the next exam forces them into action. There are several undesirable ramifications of this work style. Focusing on the exam as their goal, the students learn the material in a manner designed to satisfy the requirements of the exam rather than foster true understanding and permanent learning. In addition, the students are always working under duress because they are motivated by the stress of the impending exam.

Since you can't change the fact that most students will see the course grade as their primary goal, my chosen solution is to make a significant percentage of the course grade (I've gone as high as 50% in some classes) dependent on daily in-class participation. In addition to handing out the standard syllabus, I post my lecture notes on my website and include several study questions at the end of each set of notes. Students who are less inclined than others to speak in class can write answers to two of the study questions, hand them in before I give the lecture to prove they went over the material before class, and get their in-class participation points for that day. This provides the students numerous opportunities to polish not only their writing skills but their reading comprehension and oral presentation skills as well throughout the course of the semester. It also insures that the students read and think about the material on a regular basis, rather than just before exams. When the students have seen the material before the lecture, it enables you to move quickly through the basic facts and spend more time talking about how this material relates to material from other courses or how it relates to their lives. You build the kinds of cognitive associations that give these facts meaning, which leads



to the best quality learning there is. In addition, those students who enjoy a real intellectual exercise in class enjoy the class a lot more.

We are all pressed for time, and there is no getting around the fact that teaching writing takes time. However, it is important in all aspects of our lives that we take time for the things that are truly important. If you believe, as we all say we do, that it is important to teach writing, then you must make the time to teach writing. Below are a couple suggestions to reduce the time and labor required.

1. Many mistakes are made by multiple students in each class. Instead of writing longhand comments on every paper, write numbers on their papers and provide a list of numbered comments for the students to refer to. Indicate with a circle or underline exactly which words are problematic but give a generally worded comment on the numbered list that will apply to all instances in which that particular mistake is made.
2. A similar strategy can be applied to the daily study questions. When you hand the study questions back, provide the students with your own complete, well-written answers to the study questions. This way, when you read the students' answers, you only need to mark their answers with an A if the answer is good, a B if the answer is OK but they need to consult the answer sheet to improve it, and a C if the answer is off base. Those who got B's or C's get the extra practice of comparing their answer to the correct one, providing them with another opportunity to rehearse the material.
3. For another approach, have the students hand in an audiotape with their papers. Again, write numbers on their papers in the places where you want to make comments but record your actual comments on the tape. This way, every student gets a thorough, personalized critique they can enjoy over and over again, and all you actually have to write is numbers on their papers.

There are many factors you can blame the problem on. Most of our students were not their high school's academic elite. High schools send students to college less well prepared every year. The university administration does not provide enough faculty positions to keep class sizes small. All true, but none of this changes the fact that we who teach at the college level are faced with a generation of students who must be taught to write effectively, and the problem is too urgent to wait for the help that isn't coming. It is up to us to make the necessary commitment of time and energy to teach these kids to write properly, even though there are times when we may feel that we on the front line are the only ones who are upholding the commitment. Keep in mind that you will do some good even if you can only find a couple weeks during the semester when you can implement these practices. Those who play a small part in the solution are still part of the solution.

**Ron Michaelis, Biology**



# *Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning*

Response to "Incorporating the Teaching of Writing into Science Classes" by Ron Michaelis, 11/1/05

Whose job is it to teach writing at the university level? Until recently, many teachers might have said this job description belongs solely to the Department of English. While it is most certainly the primary focus of the English Department's Composition Program, we cannot and should not be the only purveyors of this skill. As writing in the humanities differs from writing in the sciences, and as writing in any one discipline often differs from writing in any other, it must be the responsibility of all university teachers to make sure their students are writing well. Kudos to Ron Michaelis for reminding us all of this responsibility. Ron's ideas for incorporating writing into science classes suggest, and we agree, that teaching writing is also about teaching the critical thinking and analysis skills that we all treasure as part of a university education. Ron's final words bear repeating: "Those who play a small part in the solution are still part of the solution."

**The English Department Faculty of First-Year Composition**





# Faculty Forum

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

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

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## **Status, Scholarship, and Freedom at State Comprehensive Universities**

WCU is one of the country's 300+ state comprehensive universities (SCUs). It is easier to describe SCUs by what they are not than by what they are. SCUs are not national in scope, not selective in admissions, not research extensive, and not focused on a liberal education. A more positive characterization is that SCUs are regional, provide access to higher education, are teaching institutions, and prepare most students for jobs.

In each of the contrasts in the lists above, the positively stated descriptor is lower in status, and SCUs and their faculty members frequently struggle with issues of status. Occasionally a SCU will manage to move up the status hierarchy by becoming more national, more selective, or more oriented to producing basic research. Likewise, a few faculty members may gain status in their disciplines by teaching less, doing more grant-funded research, and being more cosmopolitan (spending less time on campus dealing with local issues). The reality, however, is that few SCUs will ever be major research universities (although some have become mediocre research university wannabes) and relatively few SCU faculty members will become prestigious researchers (a recent study documented that it takes 20 SCU faculty members to produce the same number of scholarly articles per year as the average faculty member at a research university). I believe it is time for SCUs and their faculty members to opt out of the status game, a game we cannot win. Doing so can free us to redefine our work in ways that could allow us to better serve our regions, our students, and even our disciplines.

What are the implications of giving up the quest for status? First, SCUs could remain places where a wide range of students can gain access to higher education. Democratic openness has always been an important feature of SCUs. Historically, SCUs deal with students who are less-than-well-prepared and with well-prepared students who cannot afford a more elite education. These roles are among the SCU's reason for being. Recognizing this can help keep faculty members from expecting less of students. The cures for student unpreparedness and for student failure are balancing challenge with support rather than lowering standards, attributing failure to lack of student effort or inadequate teaching rather than to a lack of student ability. Status-seeking elitists should know that admissions selectivity does not correlate with the degree to which students at an institution are actively engaged in learning.

Abandoning the quest for status could allow us at SCUs to celebrate our role in preparing students for work. Recent research shows that all colleges and universities have



moved toward more emphasis on "vocationalism." Some faculty members are uncomfortable with this change. Yet SCUs historically have targeted their programs to students who were much more likely to join the workforce after graduation than to immediately attend graduate schools. During the mid-twentieth century transition from teachers colleges to state colleges, education programs were the target of anti-vocationalism. At many SCUs today, the targets are likely to be sport management, health sciences, or construction management. A strong orientation toward preparation for work is in the history and nature of the SCUs. Those of us who tend toward anti-vocationalism need to appreciate that many applied problems can and do require intellectual effort equal to that involved in the classical liberal arts education. At the same time, the champions of the traditional disciplines need to act as campus-wide citizens to ensure that students in all programs are truly educated, not merely trained.

Good and even great teaching provides no national or disciplinary stature. There is no labor market for good teachers that compares to the market for prestigious researchers. Ignoring status allows us to accept that teaching comes first at SCUs. Coming first will mean that faculty members will spend more time on teaching than on anything else. It means teaching that is perceived to be effective will be supported and rewarded. Teaching innovations, even risky ones that fail, will be considered worthwhile. An increase in the frequency of good teaching on campus will not gain the institution status, but it will surely enhance its reputation.

Faculty members at SCUs will do more than teach. Because of concerns about status, traditional research and publication still carries the most weight in faculty evaluations. Abandoning status-seeking frees the SCUs to adopt some form of Boyer's expanded view of scholarship to set a more flexible set of expectations. Certainly there is always room for traditional basic research, especially if it involves students. Broader arenas for an expanded definition of scholarship include applied research and providing scholarly expertise in consulting with agencies, businesses, and community organizations on social, cultural, political, and economic issues. Most of this work is unlikely to lead to traditional forms of peer-reviewed publication, but when such work is done in a scholarly way it should be recognized and rewarded as scholarly activity. Similarly, institutional service that involves a genuine application of disciplinary expertise rather than carrying out simple chores should also be recognized and rewarded. Perhaps most important, saying that teaching comes first at SCUs is saying that teaching is a legitimate and valued source of scholarly activity. What is now called the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) provides a mechanism for faculty involvement that mirrors traditional research and publication activities. At SCUs, teaching innovations, demonstrations of student learning, and the assessment of teaching and learning should all "count" as faculty scholarship.

We have the freedom to redefine teaching, research and service and to do so in ways that will better serve our constituents. We may find that the SCU can be the best place to work for the well-rounded teacher-scholar.

**Bruce Henderson, Psychology**



# *Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning*

Responses to "Status, Scholarship, and Freedom at State Comprehensive Universities" by Bruce Henderson, 12/1/05

## **An exSCUse for mediocrity**

In Bruce Henderson's Faculty Forum piece from December 1st, the goal of achieving excellence in scholarly pursuits was attacked under the guise of that's-not-what-State-Comprehensive-Universities-are-about. He seems bitter about something. I, for one, am numb from the constant criticism I hear from senior peers demeaning research, intellectual interests, and professional development. We always hear the same fear about becoming a Research I institution. What nonsense! These critics decry scholarly activities as a distraction to teaching, when, in fact, they augment, inspire, and validate the learning experience in the classroom. After all, the best learners should be the instructors; interested students are facilitated and enriched by such eager teachers. While SoTL, workshops, listserver groups, etc., can aid in honing teaching skills and strategies, the best teachers are more often than not those who have innate abilities and insights and who challenge students to follow their teachers in sometimes unconventional ways—not to simply discuss doing the same.

All the points raised about what Bruce feels we should be don't make sense in a shrinking world full of ever-changing challenges. We should not be preparing our students for life in Cullowhee alone. Yes, we want more people to find jobs after their university experience, but so do Asheville-Buncombe Technical and Southwestern Community Colleges. We simply have a campus culture enamored with high technology (though, perhaps not an understanding of it), with an unhealthy taste for political strategizing for federal pork and corporate perks and with a selective set of beliefs dictated from the highest office.

WCU can excel in teaching, research, and service. Just keep those who would suggest all we should do is teach and train students only for specific jobs to stay out of the way of the rest of us who are preparing students for life. This includes developing the intellectual and critical thinking skills required for fulfillment and any number of careers that our students may *choose* to excel in. "Status" be damned, excellence be praised.

**Anonymous**, AKA, a tenure track professor with excellent teaching evaluations and successful students, and who is responsible for maintaining scholarly productivity because these are the things I was told WCU wanted.

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First of all, Bruce, thank you for writing the strong essay for this month's Faculty Forum. I hope it will evoke many responses and a good conversation regarding Western's nature, role, and meaning as a university.

I have come across SCUs that have a stated aspiration of being the best or one of the premier SCUs in the country, and I think I have heard a goal for Western Carolina becoming a "national comprehensive university." If those desires are more than material for the university's glossy publications, what could this mean and how could it happen, if it could?



**Responses to "Status, Scholarship, and Freedom at State Comprehensive Universities" by Bruce Henderson, 12/1/05**

When I came to Western and the Faculty Center, I decided that SoTL could be the foundation/canopy for our whole professional faculty development program in teaching, learning, and research. It would be a sustained focus upon Western's central mission. After four years, the idea seems plausible and possible. An SCU can develop a unique reputation among all classifications of colleges and universities based upon authentic indicators, a working reputation based upon becoming and being "a sustainable culture of inquiry about teaching" (Maki). Such an academic community can result from an SCU integrating the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) into its culture and becoming a state, regional, and national leader in SoTL. Such a culture would emphasize open conversations and work about teaching and learning, making the results of such work public, applying the results of research about teaching to courses and work with students, assessing the results for the purpose of continuous improvement, disseminating what has been learned about student learning among colleagues and the culture as a whole, and building up a growing body of knowledge and wisdom about teaching and learning in the disciplines and across the disciplines, regardless of teaching methods or the stage of one's academic career.

Based upon a multi-faceted integration of SoTL over the last several years, facilitated by the Coulter Faculty Center, Western is becoming a benchmark university for such SoTL integration. And that growth has essentially been a guided, grass-roots process that speaks very, very highly of many of our faculty who have become so involved in this SoTL-based faculty development program for teaching, learning, and research, contrary to the idea sometimes presented that faculty are "too busy" to give serious time, energy, and attention to continuous and collaborative work with colleagues to improve student learning. My view is that, when even genuinely busy, stretched faculty enjoy working with colleagues for improving teaching and learning and find the experience worthwhile, applicable, and personally rewarding. We find time to do what we consider important. For we are here to not only teach but to promote, create, and guide students into real learning opportunities and experiences. That is why so many of Western's best and busiest faculty have become so involved the Center's program. Such work can revitalize or place in fresh focus why many of us became teachers in the first place. Research universities have more funding, but they do not necessarily have more awareness, knowledge, commitment, vision, wisdom, and perseverance regarding why and how SoTL can transform the academic culture as a whole and the teaching of individual faculty in particular.

Teaching is not enough and teaching is nothing if it does not lead to higher-order, creative and critical thinking and learning among students. SoTL and a strong Faculty Center to advocate for it may simply be the best way to improve student learning for individual faculty and for the university as a whole.

If I were to bring together your essay and my response discussed here, I would say that with a continued, ever-increasing level and depth of faculty participation in our SoTL-based program and with strong support from university leadership, Western could become a "Learning University" where everyone (students, faculty, staff, administrators) reconceives of her or his work in terms of how it can promote a sustainable culture for significant student learning. Such an intentional trajectory could lead to Western being an epitome of an SCU by furthering all the goals you mention: regional development, democratic access to higher education, centrality of teaching for student learning, and preparing students for employment and civic responsibilities. In addition, such an SCU would give strong support to faculty research: disciplinary research can enliven teaching and one's professional career, and research about teaching and learning (SoTL) can lead directly to assessing and improving student learning.



## **Responses to "Status, Scholarship, and Freedom at State Comprehensive Universities" by Bruce Henderson, 12/1/05**

Through the SoTL at Western initiative (<http://www.wcu.edu/SoTL/>) and its complex system of roots, trunks, and branches, Western is becoming fairly well-known nationally and internationally for its SoTL focus, work, and results, perhaps much more recognized than some people at Western may realize.

Western has been steadily moving to the forefront regionally and nationally in integrating SoTL into the academic culture and understanding that SoTL, facilitated by the Faculty Center, is perhaps the most direct, effective way to improve student learning in any discipline, across various teaching methods, from the newest faculty to the most senior, and to lay the foundation for the university to become a "Learning University." For such an SCU, this recognition would be both remarkable and simply living up whole-heartedly to its mission. To be a faculty member at such an SCU could mean being at the "best place to work for the well-rounded teacher-scholar."

Such an SCU would not make status its goal but instead would be free to be an inquiry-based, learning-laden academic culture, day by day.

### **Alan Altany, Philosophy and Coulter Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning**

I was sadly disappointed by Bruce Henderson's piece in the recent Faculty Forum. The implication that we cannot possibly succeed, and therefore must abandon, some of the basic values of a university is shocking. What impression must this piece of writing have left on our first year faculty? Nothing can be more deflating than telling someone it is not even worth trying to achieve the goals laid out for them during the hiring process and during faculty orientation. New faculty are struggling with numerous responsibilities; suggesting they simply drop part of the core values of a university should repulse them. I certainly hope it does not encourage them to seek work elsewhere.

We at WCU must ensure that an environment aimed at teaching, research, and service is maintained on campus. Student participation in faculty research is an essential component of any curriculum. In the Biology department we cannot envision our students leaving this university without research experience. The student's ability to continue his/her education or to find employment is dependent on this very experience. Performing research is not a status issue; it is an issue of remaining up to date in your area, of bringing the energy and enthusiasm gained from research into the classroom, and of helping students become better prepared for their future careers.

Please remember: this is Western Carolina University not Western Carolina Community College. Community colleges perform an admirable, invaluable role in the education system in the state of North Carolina but their role is not ours and neither should we strive to become equal.

### **Sabine Rundle, Biology**

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### **Pawn Takes Queen**

Scholars in entrepreneurship have been observing for decades that pawns can, and do, take queens. We know this to be impossible in chess, but we also know that bumblebees cannot fly. It doesn't just happen; creative destructionism, the heart of entrepreneurship, is seated in the human mind, that marvelous instrument that knows no boundaries and recognizes no limitations. Paradigm shifts lay low the giants of industry, but these shifts are created by entrepreneurs who disdain to play to the established world. Huge firms concentrate on giving the public what it wants; these firms hone, refine,



**Responses to "Status, Scholarship, and Freedom at State Comprehensive Universities" by Bruce Henderson, 12/1/05**

incrementally tweak their offerings, and serve the general good quite well. Entrepreneurs recognize that the public can't know what it wants until an entrepreneur shows them; thus, new industries are created, and the old are swept away. Of course, the giants follow into the newly uncharted lands but only when the maps are clear. By that time, the entrepreneurs have moved on to create new opportunities. It is not the recognition of an opportunity that characterizes an entrepreneur; it is the creation of an opportunity. We aren't trying to teach our students the skills to find a job; we are trying to teach them how to change the world. To do that, we can never allow negativism to enter the classroom.

Even if we never achieve the breakthrough which will sow the winds of a new paradigm, we can still create real wealth for ourselves and our families. We teach our students that they CAN compete with WalMart. You see, a giant firm requires a giant market. Firms like WalMart use a skimming strategy: they provide goods and services that appeal to the great mass of the market; some observers use the 80% rule to suggest that a giant cannot be interested in any offering that does not appeal to 80% of the market. That leaves 20% of the market which is never courted or touched by the mass of companies, and this is the proving ground of the niche market. Far more wealth potential exists in the niche market than in the broader market, not just because of the reduced competition but because attacking the niche can be done in a much less costly fashion and the barriers to entry are low. Again, having the courage to challenge the giant requires us to build self confidence in the budding entrepreneurial mind and we can permit no whiff of negativism.

No giant university can be entrepreneurial because of the same principles that prevent a giant corporation from pursuing the niche or taking the risk to enter uncharted waters. Here, as in business, innovation is seeded in the small, the agile, the bold, and the confident. Only a small university can embrace these characteristics; but, it must choose to do so. Western can make that choice.

Can we compete with the WalMarts of the university world? Why would we want to? Life is in the journey, as the end is always certain. If we might paraphrase Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, the meaning may be more clear. Jeff invested his life savings (and those of his parents, by the way) in an unproven venture. The reality of the story is that the great venture capital firms did not come calling until the potential was proven. Jeff said that he did not want to come to the end of his life and wonder what might have been. In his mind, and in ours, it is far more satisfying to make the attempt, even if it fails, than never to have striven.

Can we make this practical and applicable to Western's situation? We think we can. Consider for a moment what we might do as an institution if we had a couple of psychology professors who did seminal work in a new and emerging field. Let's assume that they broke through the admittedly substantial publication barriers that exist for professors at small schools and established an international reputation, even helping to shape the emergence of the field. The specifics aren't important, but say it was something like establishing a breakthrough into the understanding of the minds of serial monsters, and it was accompanied by the development of a new curriculum which could arm generations of students to prevail in this battle. We know that there are many such individuals and teams of professors in a variety of areas here at Western at this very moment. What should we say to these people? "We're an SCU, we can't succeed here. We need to concentrate on what all the other SCUs concentrate on: preparing our students for jobs. You are simply seeking to forward your own status and you're playing a game you can't win." We would respond that we should pour resources into their venture; we should embrace the risk. If we fail, then we just pick ourselves up and look for other battles to wage. We will be comforted in our failure by knowing that we have striven. If we succeed, then we will have changed



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the very world. Our counsel is grounded in the sure knowledge that if we do not strive, we will always be only a member of the mass of SCUs. We find scant comfort in the understanding that we will have enjoyed a safe life steeped in the halls of academe and protected from the harrowing winds of change. For us, there is no such comfort. Nor, do we find comfort in saying that we will know that we have prepared students who cannot afford an elite education, who cannot expect to lead the world, for safe careers and jobs. We say teach our people to reach for the stars, to recognize the potential greatness that is at the heart of each individual. We say, Dare to Dream! We say, let's reach for those stars ourselves. One of our favorite Cherokee sayings goes something like this: it is better to aim your bow at the Sun and strike only an eagle than to aim for the eagle and have your arrow return to earth and strike a rock. Let's aim our bows at the Sun!

What does it take to train minds to change the world? At the risk of sounding elitist, we think we know the answer to that question. It requires us to teach them that the only limits to their grasp are those that they create in their own minds. Throughout history, far more giants of society have been educated in what some would call pedestrian universities than in all the elite institutions in the world. That continues to be the case today. All it takes is one professor to sow the seeds of greatness. Those seeds are self confidence, a sure recognition that the only failure comes from retiring from the field, from giving up, from settling because the great mass of the world thinks you cannot win. Failure brings with it learning and a renewed commitment to strive yet again until our hands close on what our minds can see.

We would like to close with a story. We all know the story of how David slew Goliath. For generations people have used that story to illustrate how a poorly armed, simple herdsman can prevail in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. But the real story has far more significance, You see, David selected six pebbles for his pouch before he entered the field of battle. Why six? Because Goliath had five brothers.

**Jim and JoAnn Carland, Entrepreneurship**

While I respect my colleague's views that SCUs are "not national in scope, not selective in admissions, not research extensive, and not focused on a liberal education," I take exception. We do have admission requirements/standards and I believe there is a major effort at WCU to focus on research on teaching (SoTL) that has merit. For me, personally, there is a difference in "seeking status" as a Research I institution, and seeking status as a high quality regional university that is clear about its mission. I came to WCU from a Research I institution that "wants" to be focused on research, but does not have the economic resources to sustain the mission defined by the state legislature for that university. So, my former colleagues teach masters level classes with 80-120 students and are still expected to do major research in their fields. The focus on teaching at WCU, which *IS* the history of SCUs, is the very reason I chose to seek employment at Western. I am proud to be an educator and I work to maintain professional integrity in my teaching through continued efforts to learn and grow as a teacher. It is my opinion that we should all want to be part of university that "seeks status" as a high quality institution, preparing people to be the best in their chosen fields as we can help them to be. I agree that it is unrealistic for every university in a state to be a Research I institution. I hope that the intent of Dr. Henderson's position is the importance of clarity in our mission rather than the things we are "not." Respectfully,

**Jacque Jacobs, Educational Leadership & Foundations**



## **Responses to "Status, Scholarship, and Freedom at State Comprehensive Universities" by Bruce Henderson, 12/1/05**

Do most faculty members think, in the course of their daily work lives, about WCU's status as a State Comprehensive University? I suspect not; in fact, I did not even know that WCU was an SCU until I read Bruce Henderson's article in December. Instead, consider whether a faculty member's emphasis on teaching and scholarship is driven by the ability to teach or research effectively, combined with the expectations of the teaching institution where tenure was sought or attained.

I have worked at four institutions of higher learning—each with a distinctly different institutional focus. I started at a research institution, moved to an adult education low residence college, shifted to a state teaching college, and now, as Bruce tells me, I am employed by an SCU. I didn't join these institutions because of the type of institution they are: I joined because they were in a good location or because they offered me the faculty or administrative position that I wanted. For the most part, I did not even stop to consider what type of institution they were.

Each of these institutions had a different emphasis and focus; sometimes it took awhile to figure out what it was. But these schools also had a common denominator: they rewarded faculty members who excelled—excelled at whatever was valued by the institution. These schools were flexible enough to reward good faculty members for doing what they do best: whether it be teaching, scholarship, service, or administrative work. Although Bruce suggests that we "opt out of the status game, a game we cannot win," the subtext is strikingly status-conscious: our students are not as well-prepared as other students (a thesis which I am not prepared to accept); the scholarship of teaching should be given equal status with traditional research in peer-reviewed journals; and "teaching comes first at SCU's."

Let's be realistic: status will always be an issue. But instead of applying value-laden judgments to our work, let's be inclusive and reward excellence of any sort that is valuable to the university. Not all faculty members are good teachers. But the university's role is to focus on the strengths of the faculty and reward them for the excellent work they do—whatever it is.

### **Jayne Zanglein, Visiting Instructor of Business Law**

I hope Bruce Henderson's Faculty Forum piece on "Status, Scholarship, and Freedom at State Comprehensive Universities (SCU)" causes our new and seasoned faculty to stop and ponder the real value of research at Western, a SCU known across the state for its reputation for teaching excellence. Academic research is not about a quest for status. It is about the feeling of excitement you get when you share research findings with your students and peers. They get to see you think out loud as you describe what you did and why you did it. Sharing research with students gets them accustomed to speaking with facts not just opinions. Research energizes teaching, sustains faculty competence, and enriches student learning.

Western Carolina University should celebrate all types of research—applied research, theoretical research, sponsored research, mainstream research, specialized research, and the scholarship of teaching and learning. Each of these types of research increases faculty credibility and elevates student learning. It is particularly important for faculty at SCU's to engage undergraduate and graduate students in the research process. Research is empowering; it promotes clarity of thought, logical reasoning and effective problem solving. Armed with these skills, students will maintain an excitement about learning that will last a lifetime.

### **Scott Higgins, Research and Graduate Studies**



**Responses to "Status, Scholarship, and Freedom at State Comprehensive Universities" by Bruce Henderson, 12/1/05**

As a new faculty member at WCU, I have had the opportunity to experience first hand the teaching environments described in Dr. Henderson's essay on faculty scholarship. At my last university, I struggled for 10 years with these exact issues. As an actively practicing physician who made a career choice to enter academia in 1995, I made a conscious choice to embrace teaching as my new professional activity. I viewed this activity as equally important as practice or research and original publications, and over the years I have received enormous reinforcement from students for this decision. However, evaluation of faculty involved the usual criteria of funded research leading to original publications in the discipline. Having already been successful in one career in the private sector, I deliberately chose to be "unambitious" and to define my own criteria for scholarly activity—professional development, teaching innovations, and conference presentations in topic areas important to my discipline. I have found this to be personally satisfying, and this perspective was the vision I kept firmly in mind for all of my faculty activities. I do believe that the traditional criteria for evaluating faculty are elitist. They are designed to garner acclamation for the teaching institution but necessarily must limit the time and energy spent on student learning and student support. Those areas must be viewed as paramount if we are to optimize student outcomes. I have been surprised to find, based on student feedback from my graduate professional adult learners, that this type of scholarly behavior better defined my function as a role model for continuing education and professional preparedness than if I pursued traditional scholarly activities. The work of SCUs is vitally important, and should not be viewed as less prestigious because faculty choose to focus their talents in areas that are student-centered. I would applaud a deliberate philosophy of celebrating student-centered faculty activity as our primary mission.

**Claire DeCristofaro, Nursing**





# Faculty Forum

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

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

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## What Tiger Woods Taught Me About the Transition to Online Teaching

Recently, our Master of School Administration Program in Educational Leadership began to face intense competition from nearby institutions and now I, after almost 10 years of face-to-face teaching experience at WCU, teach totally online classes. I had taught hybrid classes, but I was extremely reluctant to make this change, even though I had always been a pioneer and a risk taker. However, last May, while facilitating the Faculty Learning Community on Online Teaching and Learning at WCU's Summer Institute, my colleagues and I discussed what I call our "transition angst." One faculty member compared our experience to that of Tiger Woods.

A few years ago, the phenomenally successful Woods fired his coach, changed his clubs, and drastically altered his swing. As crazy as it seemed ("if it ain't broke, why fix it?"), Woods was anticipating his vocational future and making necessary adjustments to maximize his golfing potential. Even though the transition was rough, it now appears that this outstanding athlete emerged with a better long-term vocational future.

As with Woods, what had become comfortable had served me well. My teaching evaluations at WCU were good and I was a finalist for the Board of Governor's Award for Excellence in Teaching. Would these things continue if I gave up face to face teaching? Was my ego getting in the way? I was being forced to give up my stage—my place in front of my audience, my students. Teaching is a performing art and I enjoy performing. Could I give this up?

I was dealing with the first question education professionals typically ask when they are about to make a change—how will this affect me personally? I then began to face the fact that teaching is not about me but about my students and what they need. The reality was that many of our students had access issues with their courses related to time, family commitments, and travel over winding mountain roads. In addition, the competition was breathing down on us.

I then had to face the second question—will I have the skills to do this? I reached out to my colleagues and a Web designer to assist me. I joined a WebCT support group and became an active participant. In my two fully online classes I have had my share of mistakes and failures. For example, I still have not mastered the Discussion component. But I now can concern myself with a third question—how will this affect my students? I



constantly review my course evaluation data and rely heavily on midterm evaluation. My students want organization, clarity, a variety of communication strategies, a chance to interact with their peers, frequent contact with me, and a personal touch. I discovered audio online tools and now my students can hear me—who I am, my Southern accent, my high school principal stories, and my response to their work (I can still perform!).

Our department found our current faculty evaluation instruments inadequate for online instruction. We therefore developed our own instrument, looking at course-specific questions, teaching-specific questions, and questions concerning the online learning environment. I analyzed the quantitative data over two semesters. One hundred percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed on the following: the syllabus and the organization of the course facilitated learning, the course used diverse communication strategies to facilitate learning, and the instructor communicated information clearly and facilitated peer student learning effectively through threaded discussions, chat, email, or WIMBA voice tools. Ninety five percent agreed or strongly agreed that the quality of the interaction with the instructor equaled or surpassed the quality of interaction in on-site courses with 86 percent indicating that the quality of interaction with student peers equaled or surpassed the quality of interaction in onsite courses.

A review of open ended comments revealed several themes. One third of the comments indicated that the element of the course that contributed most to student understanding was the use of WIMBA voice tools. Other comments concerned the organization and clarity of the course, the use of discussion, the availability of the instructor, and meaningful assignments. In the area of suggestions for improvement, several students indicated a desire to still meet occasionally with their peers. I miss seeing my students face to face, but an online class seems to force accountability for students, and how well I have come to know them online has had a positive effect on their learning.

Maybe online teaching and learning can be effective. However, effectiveness demands close attention to the organization, clarity, and design of the course—no different in fact from the demands of any other kind of teaching. In addition, it is important to personalize an online course as much as possible and voice tools help. Certainly as we compete with an increasing online market in higher education, we must be innovative while maintaining a commitment to quality and personalization. We need our colleagues for feedback. And, finally, we must be focused on students. Every class does not need to be an online class, but I have found that we have the resources at Western to ensure that such classes can be effective.

**Anna T. McFadden, Interim Director, Coulter Faculty Center, Educational Leadership**

*For a copy of the evaluation data, email Anna at [amcfadden@email.wcu.edu](mailto:amcfadden@email.wcu.edu).*



# *Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning*

Response to "What Tiger Woods Taught Me About the Transition to Online Teaching," by Anna McFadden, 2/1/06

Just recently, I took a drive to meet with a graduate student in one of my online courses. I did this because I respect the student's candor and judgment in providing me with a reality check on her perception of success in engaging an online course I was teaching for the first time. And, yes, I really valued the personal conversation over lunch and coffee that online settings deny me.

Although she generally offered encouraging feedback, a particular comment troubled me. The sentiment, attributed anonymously to a few of her peers, affirmed in effect, "This is the last online course I will ever take." (I hope that the comment wasn't in reference to my courses, but who knows?) The students particularly complained about the work overload confronting them in online courses. With few exceptions, students find online study exceedingly demanding. Mea culpa; my courses may have provoked some of the negativity reported by my trusted student conduit. Zealous to advance student engagement, I overdo things, unwisely running several interactive assignments simultaneously. I ask students to multi-task when their busy lives already demand more multi-tasking than they should ever be asked to handle. This can make them cranky.

I relate this because of my certainty about the following things:

- For better or worse, online teaching will continue to grow in traditional universities and non-traditional commercial providers of higher education.
- Migration from site-based to online teaching places an acute transformational demand on the professional identities of faculty and students impacted by it.
- Getting online designs and executions "right" is a challenge for all faculty, including the most seasoned online instructors.

Anna McFadden's "Tiger Woods" analogy is helpful because it focuses on the "tool" transformation of online instruction. In such a conversation, we are not discussing content transformation beyond the degree to which any decent teaching should keep up-to-date. Nor are we talking about transformation in the basic principles of good teaching. In 1996 Steve Ehrmann offered a cogent translation of Arthur Chickering's seven principles of good practice into the then-nascent educational realm of computer-based communication. The translation isn't revolutionary. The same good practices tend to show up in diverse forms of teaching. It is the equivalent of American to British English, not English to Urdu. A more transformational metaphor emerges from the "tool" perspective that Anna presented, perhaps from golf clubs to cooking utensils.

Much professional reflection, development, practice, and trial-and-error is required to transform good *teaching* practice successfully from one tool set to another rather foreign one. Several years ago Randy Bass, this year's keynote *SoTL Faire* speaker, told a story about technology infusion into one of his courses. He wrote about the discomfort that he and his students experienced as they confronted the new tools they were suddenly being challenged to use. Discontent showed up in Bass' student course evaluations. He was no less an excellent teacher than he was before he changed his pedagogical toolbox, but his student ratings indicated otherwise. It was the "tool transformation," not his teaching, that upset the perceptual appletart.



**Response to "What Tiger Woods Taught Me About the Transition to Online Teaching," by Anna McFadden, 2/1/06**

I think it's fair to say that I am a relatively experienced online teacher. Yet I continue to struggle. I work and worry here and there, successfully and unsuccessfully, with new and re-designed online teaching strategies. Never for a nanosecond do I believe I have it "right" in the way that I have occasionally felt satisfied (justified or not) with my classroom teaching. My students' evaluations, though mainly positive, remind me that my course designs are works-in-progress that still need hard pushes along the learning curve. I doubt that I am alone in this regard.

This brings me back to the "certainties" articulated above. To deal with them effectively, the University and the faculty need to reinforce one another to create scholarly settings where students embrace their online experiences, each one eager for the next experience, not pining for a return to practices that may increasingly be unavailable to them. As an institution and as a community of scholars, we need affirmation that the transformational depth we confront is recognized. If this is done, resources will follow to assure that we get things as "right" as we can as quickly as we can, knowing that there will always be a distance to go.

I wonder if Western has students who, having taken one or two online courses, are saying, "I'll never go back to the classroom again?" I don't know. Maybe we should find out.

**John LeBaron, Educational Leadership and Foundations**





# Faculty Forum

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

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 18, No. 7

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## **The Liberal Studies Program: What FACULTY Have to Do With It**

In the last six or eight semesters of Faculty Forum, faculty have characterized Liberal Studies Program (LS) advising as confusing and unnecessarily complex and the LS curriculum as irrelevant and meaningless. However, recent essays have also enthusiastically discussed liberal studies learning initiatives, service learning, civic engagement, learning communities, Student-Academic Affairs collaborations, and more efficient referrals of first-year students. So, are we just complaining or are we trying to find solutions?

I write as a former Director of First-Year Composition, a former member of the Liberal Studies Oversight Committee, the Liberal Studies Assessment Committee, and a tenured associate professor who has taught liberal studies courses at WCU every semester, from 1997 to the present. Granted, administrative offices and officers need to remedy some problems in LS; however, let's look for a moment at what FACULTY have done to create LS, and what they can do to strengthen it. The Liberal Studies Program was designed by faculty. Changes made to this Liberal Studies Program have been made at the request of faculty to the Liberal Studies Oversight Committee, comprised of faculty, whose recommendations were approved or denied by the Faculty Senate. All liberal studies courses are taught by faculty in programs, departments, colleges run by faculty. If faculty do not like the current LS, then faculty need to change it. If changes require help from administration, let's get it. If we can't, let's get on with matters about which faculty can make a difference. If some of us are unable or unwilling to be involved, let's support colleagues who are. Faculty are responsible for the shape Liberal Studies is in. Who is teaching your liberal studies courses? Is it:

- Faculty who design the curriculum they teach, who teach the curriculum they design?
- Faculty who teach a mix of LS and non-LS courses (rather than, say, a 4/4 LS load)?
- Faculty who are actively involved and included in departmental initiatives and decisions?



- Faculty who know WCU well enough to communicate and collaborate effectively with people and offices across campus?
- Faculty who can articulate for students connections among liberal studies, studies in the major, and their professional and civic lives?
- Faculty who are eligible for all incentives and rewards for teaching LS courses, as required by the Liberal Studies document and supported by the Faculty Senate?
- Faculty for whom advising is a required responsibility?
- Faculty who have educated and applied themselves in the means and ends of program assessment?
- Faculty directly informed and involved in meeting WCU's retention and recruitment demands?
- Faculty who make enough money not to need another job?
- Faculty who know they have a job beyond the current year?
- Faculty who have an office and computer to themselves (and no more than one office mate)?
- Faculty who are eligible for all professional development funds?
- Faculty who have the authority to influence the design of colleges and definitions of work or course loads?
- Faculty, in other words, who have the rights and responsibilities of professors on the tenure-track or in tenured positions, rather than lecturers or adjuncts partially equipped and ill-supported in temporary positions?

I offer this list of questions as a check sheet to determine what FACULTY are doing and need to do in LS. If you did not answer YES to these questions, you may turn them into a "To Do" list. The goal: give the job to the people you best equip and support or best equip and support the people you give the job.

**Marsha Lee Baker, 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 "The Liberal Studies Program: What FACULTY Have to Do With It," by Marsha Baker, 4/1/06

I enjoyed this article and your questions were right on target. You have taught it, tried to make it better, and supported the faculty teaching it. I appreciate all the time and energy you have spent in trying to make this program better. I appreciate you and what you do for our students and the university.

**Fred Hinson, Associate Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs**

## **Familiarity Can Breed Contempt**

In response to Marsha Baker's suggestions about liberal studies, I would like to suggest it might be time for faculty to discuss a related issue, the effectiveness and impact of learning communities on academics and student life.

I have been teaching a first-year seminar for three years. Many of the 22 students each year take the same courses and live together as well, a popular design in college learning communities. Such immersion in a social group, in theory, may help students establish strong, social peer groups, positively impacting WCU's retention problem. It may create life-long friendships, which can be great for loyalty to the University and alumni giving. But, it can also backfire.

Each year, I have seen friendships blossom and wilt, sometimes deteriorating dramatically and interfering with class. For instance, Susie won't work in a group project with Jenny because (she says) Jenny always comes home drunk, keeps her up till 4:30 a.m., and, to top it off, tried to go out with her boyfriend. Or four young women drag themselves out of bed, arriving at class at 9:30 exactly, or late or not at all, looking like they had been studying sex and alcohol all night, hardly able to keep their eyes open for the next 75 minutes. At least one of them arrives in her pajamas. Or John, who is very smart, becomes a pariah in class because he is always ready and prepared, has done the reading and writing assignments, and does not participate enough in the social shenanigans of the group.

These examples reflect only a few of my observations, but after three years of watching social relations interfere with academics, I can't help question the wisdom of too much familiarity. I also suspect that the unhappy social events may also increase the WCU drop out rate. I'm not a moral conservative, and these scenarios don't offend me – they just interfere with my function as a teacher. I'm not paid to be a dorm mother, social director, or drug and alcohol counselor. I would love to know if other faculty have observed similar behaviors in learning communities. Or are my first year students unusually rambunctious?

**Mary Jean Ronan Herzog, Educational Leadership & Foundations**





# Faculty Forum

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

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 18, No. 8

May 1, 2006

## **Should Applied Research Count Toward Tenure and Promotion?**

The issue of applied research has been a frequent topic of conversation lately. Like many on campus, we believe that applied research is a meaningful activity for university faculty anywhere, but it has particular relevance at regional comprehensive institutions, such as ours. As applied research becomes more prevalent, it will be important to develop strategies for evaluating and rewarding this type of scholarship in the tenure and promotion process.

Some on campus have suggested that applied research needs to be refereed to count toward tenure and promotion. We believe that counting only refereed work is too narrow of a definition for applied research. Realistically, we think that any respected refereed article, applied or traditional, should (and does) count at Western. Refereed articles, therefore, are already accounted for in the current tenure process. The problem arises with how Western should recognize work that is applied, but not refereed.

We think that applied research should be a rigorous application of a scholar's skills and it should contribute to the well-being of an external agency. For example, we are conducting a "Citizen Satisfaction Survey" for the City of Asheville. To date, we have designed the survey and we will randomly sample Asheville residents. We plan to write up the results and present them to the Asheville City Council. In our opinion, a project like this, although not refereed, could count as applied research at Western if it meets certain standards. The challenge for Western is to develop specific ways to evaluate applied research.

We offer two criteria for judging the merit of applied research. First, the rigor of the project must be evaluated. The methodological rigor of a project can be evaluated by an external evaluator or by a department head through the Annual Faculty Evaluation process. Second, the merit of an applied project should be judged on its use and influence. For example, if the City of Asheville considers our findings when crafting policy, and we show evidence of the study's influence, then our project would meet this second test. As another example, if one of our colleagues wrote a policy paper on the lottery and her paper was a primary study cited by state legislators as they debated the lottery, then the second criterion would be met. In the absence of a traditional referee process, both of these criteria must be met for applied research to count.



What proportion of a tenure-candidate's scholarly portfolio should consist of applied research? Although the specific answer undoubtedly varies from department to department, we believe that with very few exceptions, applied research should not make up the entirety of the research portion of a tenure-candidate's file. Indeed, any tenure-candidate at Western should be able to demonstrate the ability to produce high-quality refereed research. This will improve the institution's academic profile and enhance the credibility of Western's instructors in the classroom. In our opinion, ideal tenure-candidates will be able to write for multiple groups—simultaneously reaching applied and academic audiences.

**Chris Cooper and Gibbs Knotts (both from Political Science and Public Affairs)**

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