



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 21, No. 1

September 1, 2008

Let's Grow WCU While Supporting the Region

At the spring faculty meeting in 2008, our Chancellor shared a possible vision for a changing Cullowhee—a whitewater park, a revitalized "back entrance" to campus and a town center at the current location of the Camp Building. In return, this is the time to discuss our options as a university. We are fortunate to have some time for input and in that the administration has been soliciting feedback via survey. We encourage all faculty to provide that input; as we do so, though, perhaps we could also take into account the following concerns.

To begin with, few of us are opposed to growth. Small businesses can prosper in Cullowhee as the university grows, adding vitality, employment and profit to the community while providing incentives to students to spend more time on campus. This is the kind of growth which the Cullowhee Revitalization Endeavor (CURVE) supports.

However, the Chancellor also mentioned the possibility of a Moe's Burrito, a Barnes and Noble, or a Starbuck's Coffee, and here I do have qualms. How could any professor object to a bookstore or coffeeshop, you may ask? But it's not hard if the businesses in question can be expected to attempt to undersell local businesses, to hire cheaper and less qualified labor to provide the bare minimum of service, to offer a standardized range of selections, and to waste maximum resources while doing so. Such companies' practices are too often oppositional to a regional comprehensive university's mission: to make ever greater efforts to support the peoples and economy of *this* region.

Of these issues, the most troubling is the possibility of WCU setting up chains in competition with unique local businesses. Sylva already has a local independent bookstore, City Lights; its owners have supported campus literary festivals since their inception, and supported our visiting writers' series for many years before that, ordering and buying the authors' books and sitting for untold hours outside of our events to provide them to audiences. City Lights has further accepted our interns from the Professional Writing program, providing crucial hands-on training and pre-graduation business experience. Cullowhee also has a coffeeshop and bakery, the Mad Batter. Like City Lights, the Mad Batter has built its business from scratch, providing quality, responsible products and superior service. Both businesses have made a point of serving WCU; the Mad Batter actually schedules its vacations around Western's. And Cullowhee has recently acquired an independent burrito shop, Rolling Stone, owned and run by faculty members.

A secondary issue is that Cullowhee and Jackson County have a unique environment: personal, distinctive, independent, memorable. Many of the students who come here speak of our small-town atmosphere as a "draw." It's true that others toss around pejorative comments about the lack of night life, malls, and consumer opportunities; it can be very fashionable, when we're young, to disparage wherever we find ourselves—and yet, here they still are, with the highest test scores in our history. It would be easy—too easy—to mock or demean our students, to treat them as a blind market force, to say, "Oh, they don't care about anything but consumption; they won't patronize City Lights; they only want McDonald's." But I think we can all see that this is not necessarily true, that, given the chance, our students can be at

least as progressive as faculty or administration. After all, they are here, often holding a reusable mug of fair-trade organic coffee from the Batter or a fresh burrito from Rolling Stone. Our students, like most of us, want to do good while also doing well, when they understand the choices. But how could we criticize students for preferring the generic, if that were all we provided?

The constantly-increasing success of downtown Asheville, which has refused to admit chain businesses, suggests that we don't need to become Charlotte to be attractive, nor do we need to endanger our local businesses to keep up with the times. The most forward-thinking universities and communities capitalize upon their existing strengths to put forward a unique identity, not to copy everyone else's. If the new town center were to offer opportunities and incentives first to business owners who already have a stake in the community, rather than to chains with none, we could continue to offer students a distinct identity and atmosphere while even more actively engaging with the community which has been so good to us.

Indeed, if "engagement" is our watchword, offering aggressive chains a chance to destroy these businesses is perhaps not the best way to demonstrate it. It behooves an engaged Western not to force a single vision upon the community, but to grow in ways which support what the community already has, and what it already wants. The success of our local businesses suggests that the community (including our students) does want them.

As the Chancellor has noted, we are on the cusp of change: changes in state standards, in technology, in development, and in our region. We are fortunate in that the Chancellor sees that a revitalized Cullowhee can be good for everyone, but it rests with all of us together to be sure that it IS good for everyone, not only for the shareholders of Barnes and Noble.

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Hello everyone:

The *Faculty Forum* has been in publication at WCU for 20 years with little change to its format. A quick perusal of its archives reflects the many changes that have occurred in education in general and at WCU specifically during that time. Terry Nienhuis shepherded the publication with great care through all those years of change, but with Terry's recent retirement, I am excited about the opportunity to move the publication forward into its third decade as the key written communication tool between and among faculty at Western.

Last Spring the Faculty Center conducted a survey to determine the feasibility of digital publishing as opposed to hard copy; over 90% of the faculty chose digital format, citing "saving trees" as their rationale. So, as the Fall 2008 semester begins and a new series of *Faculty Forums* is launched, we have adopted the digital format but retained the traditional look. The publication will be emailed to you as a pdf attachment around the 1st of every month. If for any reason you are unable to download and print it, please let us know. As always, we will be in the constant market for new articles by faculty, and for responses to the previous month's featured article, so please don't hesitate to send me an email at vguise@wcu.edu if you have a topic in mind, OR if you hear another faculty member discussing an issue at the water cooler that would be good grist for the mill. I look forward to working with you and the fine staff at Coulter Faculty Center. Here's to Terry and to the future of the *Faculty Forum*!

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