



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

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A Much-Needed Sea Change

Many of our WCU students are weak readers and writers. Okay, I've acknowledged "the elephant in the room" that instructors across the disciplines and class levels often describe to me but will not openly acknowledge in public, a WCU secret I've known for as long I've worked at WCU (since 1992).

As University Writing Center (UWC) Director for the past nine years, understanding and addressing the writing needs of all our students has been my sole focus, and I often describe my job to non-university friends as mission work—meaningful, low paid, and never-ending.

WCU is not the only American university to enroll students who are neither effective readers nor effective writers. Academically effective readers can sustain reading for more than an hour, will look up unfamiliar words in a dictionary (online or otherwise), will annotate texts for the purpose of retrieving meaning later, and will achieve sufficient success in understanding texts. Effective writers know the importance of communicating purposefully with intended readers and will "do whatever it takes" to achieve this success in any given context.

Many of our honors students are effective readers and writers, whereas many of our non-honors students are not, and every semester instructors across the disciplines and class levels are faced with the following daunting behaviors: students do not read their assigned texts and will write papers the way they speak or text-message.

No one instructor, First Year Composition program, or University Writing Center can solve this widespread cultural problem, and to help most of our students become effective readers and writers will require nothing less than a sea change, specifically, a regular context wherein all invested parties, from the highest administrators to the lowest-paid adjunct instructors, can regularly communicate honestly and constructively about—not what "should" be but—what "is, what "can be," and how to get from here to there.

When, if not NOW, and HOW do we begin this important conversation?

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Coulter Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning

Last month we received no responses to the article by *Planning for Changes to the WCU Learning Management System (WebCAT)* by Carlie Merritt, Health and Human Services. It's not too late! Send us your comments! However, we did receive a thoughtful and in-depth response from **Debbie Singleton** from Health, Physical Education and Recreation to the May 2009 Faculty Forum which featured an article entitled *Make Room For Baby: The Rising Teen Pregnancy Rate and It's Challenge to WCU* by Sharon Jacques, Nursing Program. We are pleased to share that with you and urge YOU to respond to **Faculty Forum** articles and consider writing one yourself.



Sharon Jacques' article, "Make Room for Baby..." in the May Faculty Forum sheds light on a topic that many individuals are very uncomfortable discussing within a classroom setting or with their children. Sex education does not need to be a "taboo" subject. As evident in popular culture, sex is clearly mainstream. There are television shows depicting the life of a pregnant teenager, movies that glorify sexual encounters that have no negative consequences, apparel lines for tween girls that include padded bras and thong underwear, and music with explicit lyrics that describe sexual anatomy. If information about sex is everywhere, then why do we have a problem with teenage pregnancy rates or sexually transmitted diseases? Maybe it is because we have approached education about sexual health as an all or nothing debate. If we get teenagers to promise to be abstinent until marriage, then we won't have these problems. Or... If we educate teenagers about sexual health in a comprehensive manner, then we won't have these problems. It is not that simple.

Sex education needs to be part of a comprehensive, holistic approach that demonstrates positive adolescent health outcomes. A comprehensive program needs to include opportunities for teens to participate in lifetime recreation and sport activities, involvement in the arts, educational support that assists students with career planning and college preparation, work experiences, money management, and a family life/sex education program. In addition to the support programs, teens need access to comprehensive medical care including reproductive health care and mental health counseling. These types of programs have demonstrated lower pregnancy rates, delayed onset of intercourse, better sexual health behaviors and higher graduation rates.

The second aspect of comprehensive, holistic sex education is the responsibility of parents and/or guardians. Children look to their parents for guidance, help with decision making, and the clarification of morals and values. Parents need to take the initiative to assist their children in understanding healthy sexuality and its relation to their overall health and development. This means more than handing them a book on puberty and saying, "read this and then you will understand". A more effective method is to take the time to sit down with your children and read the book together, helping them to understand what will or is happening to their body and being available and willing to answer their questions. Of course, parents need to understand and have some knowledge about sexual health in order to feel comfortable communicating with their children.


The third aspect of comprehensive, holistic sex education is to provide young adults with the knowledge and resources to make healthy decisions surrounding their overall wellness, including their sexual health. In many ways, we have these opportunities already in place here at Western. There are courses on women's health, sexual health, human sexuality, marriage & family and probably others that I am not aware of. The Women's Center, Wellness Program, Counseling Services, Health Services and the Jackson County Public Health Department are all great resources for students. Yet, there are students who still are unaware of the consequences of their risky sexual behaviors or their lack of knowledge surrounding their choices for prevention of pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases. If we are going to be effective in reducing rates of STD's transmission and unintentional pregnancies among college students, we need to increase educational opportunities and awareness. If we are going to prepare future parents to be a positive aspect of their children's sexual education, then we need to prepare them. (Students in my Health 360 have some interesting ideas on how to address these questions; their comments are in the later part of this response)

The fourth aspect of comprehensive, holistic sex education is to embrace the technology that will allow educators to reach our target population, teens and young adults. Sex education in a classroom setting can be ineffective and insufficient. In many school districts there are constraints placed on what and how you can teach family life/sex education. In college level health classes such as our Health 123: Health & Wellness course, sexual health is only one small part of what we try to cover during a semester. Sometimes we find ourselves devoting only two days to the subject. Is this enough, do students need more? How can we reach students besides a classroom setting?

The state of North Carolina may have an idea. The Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Campaign of NC, based in Durham, has created a “Birds and Bees Text Line”, an educational text messaging service. The Birds and Bees Text Line allows teens to obtain medically accurate answers to sex and health related questions through personal, anonymous text messages. The line is staffed by individuals who have graduate degrees in public health or social work. The service is supported by a grant from the state health department and is one of several efforts across the country in which health educators are using technology to offer teens “sex ed on their turf”. In addition to text messaging services, there are blunt websites on sexual health such as Columbia’s Go Ask Alice!, Atlantic Health’s TeenHealthFX, and Planned Parenthood’s TeenWire. My students in Health 360 visited these websites and found them insightful and useful.


Educating our children, our students, and ourselves about sexual health shouldn’t be such an uncomfortable experience. If we realize that our sexual health is an important component of our overall wellness, we can learn to respect it in the same way we limit the amount of fat in our diet, make sure we exercise each day, and put on sunscreen to protect our skin.

I asked my students from Health 360: Sexual Health Through the Lifespan to respond to Dr. Sharon Jacques’ article in the last Faculty Forum. Here are some of their comments:

 *Classes being offered at WCU are essential for educating students about healthy sexuality. I have learned more in my Health 360 class concerning sexual health than in the past 20 years. I think it should be a requirement for every student to take a class like this, plus it was fun. Also, maybe a class could be offered for students to learn how to respond to educating their future kids concerning sexual health.*

Maybe Western feels like they have helped students a lot by having the phone boxes, less expensive contraception and counseling services. I believe Western can step it up a notch. I believe contraception at the health center should be free. I cannot even count the number times I have needed a cat tran late at night and ended up walking to my dorm. I can only recall seeing two emergency phone boxes, and I am a sophomore. I also rarely see police around campus. WCU could improve in these areas.

As for educating the community in general, I think just advertising and getting the word out is doing great justice for individuals. I believe that special events that are held on the UC Lawn displaying information about rape or sexual assault victims are helpful. It reaches people on an emotional level. I think WCU should do things like that and get people involved all over Jackson County.

 *WCU does a lot to promote sexual health practices on campus. It is unfortunate that so few students listen. The best we can do is to continue to fund programs and advertisements. We could also make it more convenient for students by having free condoms and programs available in all the residence halls and maybe even in some academic buildings.*


As mentioned in the article, the best way to prevent unwanted pregnancies and the transmission of STD’S and STI’S is by educating our future parents and teachers. People are uncomfortable talking with kids about sex so kids are unaware of the risks and ways to protect themselves. If we can become informed and comfortable enough to talk openly and honestly about sex with our children and students, we will see a great improvement in the sexual health of our community.


Conduct outreach programs through health fairs at local schools, recreation centers, churches, anywhere that will allow a WCU health fair to come. The fair can include booths dealing with different topics

such as pregnancy, gender issues, sex choices, games, and learning opportunities through interactive question and answer sessions. We need to be informative in every aspect of educating these groups; parents, teachers and students.

I think that WCU can educate students on healthy sexuality as well as helping decrease pregnancies by getting more word about it out there. Although I have had sex ed classes since fourth grade, I still learned a lot from this semester due to the fact that my earlier classes didn't go into this much detail with my younger age group. They do have contraceptives here on campus but how many students really know about it or where to exactly get them. There are some people who have no idea where the health center is here on campus, let alone where they can receive free condoms. I think more programs or awareness events should be offered throughout the year.


As an assignment this semester in Health 360, myself and a partner taught a demonstration workshop on breast and testicular self-exams in a residence hall. None of the men knew how to do a testicular exam and very few women knew to check for breast cancer. These are important things to know regarding health and lifestyles. In my sophomore year of high school, I had to take home a baby that was so realistic for an entire weekend that it opened my eyes and made me think, twice about engaging in activities that could lead to an unwanted pregnancy. I think it would be interesting to see how if a class of college students could do the same activity. If they did, then there may be more awareness before engaging in un-protective sexual activities.


 As a student at Western Carolina University, and possibly the next generation of parents, I feel like more programs and events should be put in place as an effort to decrease teen pregnancy, unplanned pregnancies, recognition of gender issues and a decrease in sexually transmitted diseases. WCU offers many courses about sexuality, as well as awareness for gender issues and STD'S. I believe that similar programs should be offered throughout the county and the community. WCU could provide courses and programs outside the university so that people can be more aware.

 After reading the article many options came to mind that WCU can do to educate students about healthy sexuality. I know just from taking this course (Health 360) I have probably tripled my knowledge on sexual health and just being healthier as a young adult in general. I think offering more in depth courses like Health 360, PSY 331 and SOC 365, would be a great start. We all have to take electives and I know I was very excited about taking this course when I signed up for it.

Another way to get more information out to WCU students about healthy sexuality would be pamphlets distributed to dorms and freshmen when they first arrive at Western. Another great resource on campus is the women's center. That could be a place that would be great to put more healthy sexuality information. It would be beneficial to have a men's center on campus for the same reasons. These would be great resources because sometime separating genders makes it easier to get the facts and be safe without someone feeling uncomfortable about asking questions or seeking out information.

One of the biggest scares on college campuses is fear of getting pregnant or getting someone else pregnant. WCU needs to get information out about contraceptives by having presentation in dorms and making them readily available to students. Even though they are offered at the health center, not everyone knows that. I also think more STD awareness needs to be brought to the student's attention.

 We need better access to condoms other than vending machines (uncertain about brands, some don't fit properly) and Health Services (embarrassing to ask or take them in front of people you don't know). WCU should provide more learning opportunities for all students in regards to sexual assault and STD prevention. Have students participate in service learning opportunities where they are educating other WCU students about sexual assault and STD prevention. Provide information for parents about college students and sex so they can be informed and be able to talk to their sons or daughters about it or know where to send them for help .I hope in the future that WCU becomes more involved in this issue.... Because I had not seen anything about prevention in high school or college until I took this class (Health 360).

 WCU can continue to offer the options it does for students. I really think it helps that our health services provides so much for students. Condoms, contraceptives, and the vaccine Gardasil are all great to have locally at a college campus. I think more informative classes (such as Health 360) should be offered. This class could train students as peer educators to go to local middle and high schools and educate young boys and girls on the matters of sex and teenage pregnancy. I personally don't think it's a topic that should be sugarcoated. I don't think schools are doing enough for young kids and it is up to us, as future educators, peer mentors, and role models to help our community. I think WCU should hold a seminar for those who want to teach this topic in the schools and train them to do so. If we can make the community more aware, maybe we could reduce the rates of teenage pregnancy and STDS.

The easiest way to solve all of these problems is to stress sex education. I know that that there are already programs in place that teach young people how to be smart as far as sex goes but we need to take it to another level. Kids are bombarded by the media. Sex sales stuff on TV, it is hard for a child not to be influenced by it. That is why parents play a bigger role than they think they do. Whether kids admit it or not they learned the majority of what they knew from their parents. By stressing the importance of healthy sexuality to us (college students) now, we will in turn carry that on to our children. Some ideas: Education that teaches kids about sex and how to deal with uncomfortable situations.... A mentoring system to help teenagers deal with their questions about sex... Classes such as Health 360 allow us to be very open about the topics and as a result we learn a lot both through the class and from each other.

Debbie Singleton & students
Health, Physical Education and Recreation