



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

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FOREIGN LANGUAGES, ACADEMIC CURRICULA, AND THE CHANGING WORLD

The issue of foreign languages can easily stir up controversy with very different opinions, all of which are --I'd like to believe-- well intended and usually well informed. The document on foreign languages I recently sent out to Academic Affairs and Arts and Sciences prompted an unexpected flood of responses with very valid, if at times contrasting, viewpoints on this subject. Because of the interesting dialog generated by the document, I was asked to submit a version of it to the Faculty Forum, and I am happy to oblige.

It is an undeniable fact that the United States has ceased to be a monolithic society but it remains largely monolingual, and at some levels there is even a steadfast reluctance to promote the study of foreign languages. The availability of foreign language instruction is very limited and in many instances confined to college. In pre-college education the decision on this matter has been left up to the local school systems and many choose not to require a foreign language at all, while others only require 1-2 years of a foreign language in high school, with instruction often being inadequate to develop substantial language competency among the students. Foreign language instruction at the high school level is often in English and very little material is covered. It is hard to justify this as the only venue of foreign language instruction. That an individual can travel to other countries (as one respondent pointed out) without speaking anything other than English is a testament to the foreign language competency of peoples in other countries and this puts the monolingual American traveling overseas in a clear position of inferiority as (s)he is at the mercy of the host country. I, for once, am happy that I can effectively communicate in a few languages other than my own.

Monolingualism and ethnocentrism have historically shaped United States foreign policy. Lack of foreign language competency perpetuates a worldview that Americans embrace national identity blindly and care little to take steps to bridge cultural gaps for the betterment of all. Recent awareness of the global nature of our society has brought about the need for multilingual and multicultural understanding. It is generally agreed that if Americans are to become knowledgeable about the world, the next generation should acquire more than a fragmented foreign language competency at the high school level. Less ethnocentric attitudes are certainly needed in this --and every-- society. The study of a second language creates the desire to understand other cultures and the sensitivity to accept them. These multicultural skills are needed much more today than in the past and many institutions of higher learning acknowledge the importance of foreign languages and require a certain level of competency among their students. Being bilingual gives individuals the ability to know first-hand what it means to transcend the limitations of a single tongue and culture, breeding sympathy, preventing misunderstanding, bias and bigotry, and discovering goodwill between cultures. From a more "practical" point of view, proficiency in a second (and third) language gives job seekers a clear advantage over those who do not have those language skills. The web site of our sister institution NCSU states that "Today, knowledge of a foreign language is more important to Americans than ever before. Foreign languages have become important because so many

facets of American life --business, politics, education, the media, the arts, science, technology, and travel have become truly international in scope.”

There are many short and long-term benefits to society for having multilingual citizens. They help enhance economic competitiveness, improve global communication, and maintain political and national security interests. The United States must educate students who are equipped linguistically and culturally to communicate successfully both in a pluralistic American society and abroad with the diverse peoples with whom they share a city, nation, and world. In most developed nations, having a command of one or more foreign languages is a normal experience. Foreign languages are just another part of the education process and of human existence. For many people, it is odd even to think of only knowing their native language. We need to look beyond our borders to learn from the successes of other cultures in bilingual education, and focus on countries that have succeeded in educating citizens to be multilingual. In many nations, the study of languages is considered essential to the education of their students and foreign language classes have the same status as all other academic classes. Language is seen contributing to the inner enrichment of the student as well as promoting internationalism. For example, in most western European nations, students begin their mandatory foreign language instruction in the first grade with a second foreign language added as they start middle school. By the time they go to college, students can communicate effectively in three languages (their own and two more). Compared to students in most of the world, American students lag far behind in their foreign language capabilities. The majority of students in the US do not begin a second language until they are young adults and then they only have an average of 150 contact hours with that language. The ability to function beyond the tourist level takes at least 600 contact hours.

The UNC Tomorrow initiative clearly identifies “Knowledge of a foreign language” as one of the critical skills for global competitiveness (UNCT Report, p. 13) and one of the suggested strategies is to “increase student proficiency in foreign languages” (UNCT Report, p. 16). Any department that decides to eliminate, reduce, or “relax” the foreign language requirement will be putting itself at odds with the UNC Tomorrow policy that has been approved and mandated by the UNC Tomorrow Commission and endorsed enthusiastically by UNC President Erskine Bowles. Sister institutions of equal or (dare I say) greater academic caliber in the state are moving or have already moved towards universal foreign language education as part of their desire to comply with the UNC Tomorrow initiative. Below are some data taken from our sister institutions in the UNC System:

University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. Minimum requirement is 3 semesters; some majors require 4 semesters.

UNC-Greensboro. College of Arts and Sciences, 4 semesters; Bryan School of Business and Economics, 3 semesters; School of Health and Human Performance, 2 semesters; School of Music, 2 semesters.

UNC-Charlotte [Admission information is both in English and Spanish]. College of A&S, 4 semesters.

Eastern Carolina University. BA degree requires 4 semesters; BS requirement varies by program.

NC State University. College of Humanities and Social Sciences requires 3 semesters. The rest of the university requires 2 semesters.

NC Central University. General Education requires 3 semesters of a foreign language across the board.

UNC-Asheville. Requirement for admission to UNC-A: two units of the same language in High School. General foreign language requirement: two semesters for everyone.

Appalachian State University. College of A&S: For the BA, 2 semesters of intermediate or higher level foreign language (excluding 101, 102); College of Business: For the BS in International Business, a minor in a foreign language is required; College of fine and Applied Arts (includes Nursing, Family and Consumer Sciences, and Technology). For the BA, 2 semesters of second-year foreign language or higher.

UNC-Wilmington. General Education requires every student at the university to take one semester of a foreign language. A revision goes up for a vote requiring all students to take 3 semesters in a foreign language.

Winston-Salem State University. Mass Communications and English majors are required to take a foreign language at the elementary and intermediate levels.

UNC-Pembroke. No foreign language requirement. An ad hoc committee was formed and is recommending a requirement for all schools.

NCA&TSU. The College of Arts & Sciences recommends students to take 2 semesters of the same foreign language. Departments in A&S that have a foreign language requirement include English, Biology, Chemistry, Speech, History, Liberal Studies, Mathematics, Political Science, Psychology, Sociology and Social Work (the list may not be complete).

Fayetteville SU. Foreign language required for the Nursing and English majors only. The new chancellor is in favor of having a language requirement across the board. Implementation of a language requirement is expected.

No information was found on FL requirements at UNC School of the Arts or Elizabeth City SU. It is worth noting that on ECSU's web site, the Chancellor's Welcome appears both in English and Spanish.

The above data overwhelmingly show that foreign languages are part of the requirements at most institutions (this is more evident at the more prestigious institutions). In sum, this is not just a curricular matter pertaining to the College of Arts and Sciences at Western Carolina University. It is a much larger philosophical issue about what real "education" is and should be in this shrinking world of ours, and the role of foreign languages in that process. Most developed nations have understood this and are already moving in this direction; the US definitely cannot afford to lag behind. While particular interests should not be completely ignored, the larger common interest (the intellectual well-being of our students) must prevail over each department's desires to maintain or eliminate the foreign language requirement for its majors. Do we really want to "relax" our requirements to the point that the degrees we offer our students are less valuable than those they obtain at sister institutions in the state and beyond? It is this question that should inform the discussion on this subject, which transcends the confines of our small microcosm in the beautiful mountains of Western North Carolina.

And now the floor is open for more debate!

Santiago García-Castañón, Ph.D.

Professor of Spanish and Head, Department of Modern Foreign Languages

Please note: 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, you may input your comments directly through the wiki on the Faculty Forum webpage, or email vguise@wcu.edu by the 15th of the month following publication of the article you wish to respond to.

Coulter Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning

Responses to March Faculty Forum article by Dr. Norma Smith *Contingent Faculty: Paupers of the System*

Sharon Jacques **Mar 2, 2009 4:55 PM**

I hear you, Norma. At the last Faculty Assembly meeting in Chapel Hill there were representatives urging that all faculty earning over \$60,000 "give back" 1% of their salary to the state as a way to impress the General Assembly. That didn't fly very far, although most of us expressed a need to protect the lower-level earners (both EPA and SPA) in the UNC System. The current term seems to be "furlough" as a way of reducing salary expenses temporarily. If that happens, I think tenured faculty and administrators should take the first cut.

Sharon Jacques, Nursing

Eric Hendrix **Mar 4, 2009 3:30 PM**

I agree wholeheartedly with you, Norma, and appreciate you stepping forth to rock this boat. Hopefully, once spring break winds down, there will be more excellent responses from readers. The Georgia solution strikes me as the fairest all around response to "cutting back." It's hypocritical at best to be told we contingent faculty are so important and then when funds run low to have us be the first ones cut. This is de-moralizing, especially realizing many of us "may be back in the fall because of high enrollment." Apparently, when the money is there, we're really important; otherwise ... what happened to "thinking OUTSIDE of the box"?

Einstein stated that the same mindset which created a problem cannot solve that problem. Thinking outside of the box to solve issues is not only QEP, but provides the perfect opportunity to find a workable solution that benefits all involved. Now, that would make Einstein very proud!

At the same time, I completely disagree with the suggestion that all faculty making over \$60k take a 1% salary reduction; especially "as a way to impress the General Assembly;" that sends the wrong message. I don't care about the G.A. These people not only earn their wages, but have earned that privilege as well; they should be respected.

Creating, however, an environment of mutual commitment to the goals we all share by providing all involved a chance to work one day during a school year (perhaps two?) respects ALL involved and most importantly, raises high the bar of seeking equitable solutions to difficult situations rather than knee-jerking into the future when times are tough. Thanks again for your heartfelt, thoughtful, and well-composed posting.

Eric Hendrix, English

Norma Smith **Mar 4, 2009 10:33 PM**

Correction: "The Georgia solution" should read as the "Maine" solution. Thanks! Eric Hendrix, English

Greg Adkison

Mar 9, 2009 12:16 AM

*Except for describing how faculty cuts negatively affect students and the call for us to act as enlightened leaders, the March edition of Faculty Forum expressed an unjustified (and presumably unintentional) conceit that reflects badly on WCU's contingent (i.e., fixed-term) faculty. For example, saying that the loss of fixed-term positions is inhumane diminishes the meaning of "inhumane" and fails to recognize the meaning of "fixed-term." Also, complaining about the terms and pay defined by contracts we *choose* to sign misdirects responsibility. Worst of all, the piece implies that fixed-term faculty members deserve the same protections given to colleagues in viable programs who have *earned* tenure or who are successfully progressing toward tenure. If someone wants the terms and pay associated with tenure, then that person should compete for a tenure-track job. If the person is unable to secure a tenure-track position, then perhaps a reflective assessment of one's qualifications, professional value, and *choice* to serve in a fixed-term position is in order. On the other hand, perhaps an evaluation of priorities is appropriate if a different reason underlies the *choice* to be in a fixed-term position at WCU (e.g., love of our mountains or love of a spouse or dependent who is tied to this location).*

The fears associated with being in a fixed-term contract are understandable, but some people consider them acceptable trade-offs for interactive teaching and satisfying research in a beautiful place that offers a uniquely southern Appalachian flavor of nature, serenity, and outdoor activity.

Greg Adkison,
Fixed-term Instructor
Department of Biology

Jayne Zanglein

Mar 15, 2009 4:31 PM

The discussion about contingent faculty is an emotional one, in general, but triggers even greater emotions in tough financial times. That's because the purpose of contingent faculty is to give the administration flexibility in terms of budgeting and staff--and this becomes essential during a harsh recession such as the current one.

On the other hand, all contingent faculty are not created equally. They are diverse in terms of pay, title, potential for job security and advancement, and departmental expectations. Contingent faculty on one campus are not treated the same as contingent workers on other campuses. More importantly, contingent faculty on this campus enjoy different rights, expectations, pay, and authority depending on the type of contingent faculty (adjunct, fixed term, endowed professor, lab instructor, grant-funded, etc.) and their departmental support. Whenever such a wide divergence of terms and conditions exists, fear creeps in--fear that some contingent employees are more secure, enjoy better pay and status, and are more likely to advance than others. There's a feeling of inequality and perhaps a fear of being taken advantage of.

As the former Coulter Faculty Fellow for Part-time Faculty, I have heard these comments before. But let me end on a positive note. The contingent faculty who remain at Western year after year, love and appreciate their jobs. They are pointing out their concerns so that their colleagues better understand their situation and to assist administration in making sound financial decisions that will benefit students, faculty, and the university as a whole.

Jayne Zanglein
Business Law

Lesa Childers

Mar 18, 2009 9:44 AM

As a graduate of WCU and a practicing clinical social worker in the surrounding communities, I have been honored to serve as adjunct staff in the Social Work department for several semesters. I find the experience of sharing my skills and knowledge with up and coming social workers to be incredibly rewarding for me and, I believe, for the students, as well. As someone who still is "in the trenches" in our field, I consider my perspective to be unique and vital to the students I teach -- real life vs. theory on many levels. The decision to cut part time staff is a painful one for me. While I did not depend on the pay for my livelihood, it certainly allowed me the opportunity to be a part of an academic setting and I am extremely proud to be contributing to the education of others in my field. Since I drive from Asheville to Cullowhee twice a week to teach one class per semester, it certainly has not been a matter of grand financial gain. It was about "making a difference" and being a part of the future of social work. I will miss my role at WCU and regret that budgetary decisions have warranted such drastic measures. But I am proud to have contributed while I could.

Sincerely,

Lesa Childers, LCSW