

Meaningful Change Begins With You

In recent months we have heard so much about "change" at Western that anyone who now talks seriously about transformation and the opportunities it presents risks talking in clichés. "We are in a period of transition." "This is a time of great change at WCU." "We are on the brink of a naissance at Western." We have heard such words and phrases so often this year that we are in danger of not taking them seriously any more. But the public articulation and repetition of this sentiment is a necessary and powerful force in creating a unified and dynamic academic community. And it has already worked! Several graduate students have spoken with me about how excited they are with this period of great and meaningful change at WCU. We have to say these words often and risk making them a cliché in order to get everyone "on the same page." Even in a period of transition, change doesn't happen automatically. We still have a responsibility to take initiative and make things happen.

In his book, Inside Bureaucracy, Anthony Downs examines the process of organizational development and finds that creativity and growth can often stagnate in a process of bureaucratization. Organizations that initially flourish can as easily decline or fossilize when bureaucratic rules and regulations become self-serving ends in themselves--stifling creativity, change, and vitality. When academic bureaucracies fossilize they become what Downs calls "administrative cultures," where the reward structure overwhelmingly favors the administrative staff, where administrators make all the important decisions, and the further growth of the bureaucracy is valued above all else. Downs characterizes the "dynamic" institution as one that clearly identifies its mission and spends most of its creative energies making that mission prevail. He characterizes the overly bureaucratized institution as one that loses sight of its mission and takes as its tacit goal the enforcement of ever-increasing rules and regulations and the continued growth of bureaucracy. In such an institutional structure, protecting one's bureaucratic turf and position in the hierarchy becomes more important than serving any clientele or sense of mission.

When Chancellor Bardo arrived at WCU last year he invited the faculty to lead. He gave out his e-mail address and made it clear we all had free access to the "top of the hierarchy." He asked us to rethink our mission, and he challenged us to implement our vision. Thus, we all began to talk about "change." . The opportunity for change is real. Our organization is at a crossroads. We can take up Dr. Bardo's challenges or permit the university to drift back toward increasing bureaucratization. The ball is now in our court. We must advance beyond the words into implementation and action. Perhaps as someone suggested at our recent Forum/Assembly on our 21st Century Mission, we must engage in a continual process of change.

What does this mean in concrete terms? For one thing, it means that each of us needs to take a hard look at what we do to create a rich learning environment for our students. Jane Hall reminded me recently that most learning for students occurs outside the classroom. Students pursue most of their learning in libraries, in readings and assignments outside of class, in field work, and among their peers in the dormitories. The classroom is important but only as the bridge to the world of learning outside the classroom. Obviously, teaching is much more than presenting information. We need to be about the business of designing learning experiences that are challenging, creative, and at least interesting, if not always exciting. If all faculty would engage in a searching self-assessment of their effectiveness in creating vibrant learning experiences, prospects for making our mission statement a reality would be greater. Change begins in each of our own classrooms.

How else might we take initiative? For starters, how about joining the many Faculty Project Teams that are studying and implementing the principles of collaborative learning? Or maybe more of us need to actively support the Chancellor's proposal of an Honors College where student residential living will be a systematic part of the learning environment. What did you do when the Chancellor's memo on the Honors College crossed your desk? Did you file it in the recycling bin? Or did you read it carefully and arrange to attend the open meeting for interested and supportive faculty on Monday, March 25th at the Mountain Heritage Center Auditorium? Chancellor Bardo called that meeting "to gain a sense of the faculty with regard to the college." We all have to pick and choose what we attend, but this is a unique opportunity to influence our direction as a university. What did you do the last time there was a request to encourage a student to submit a proposal for the undergraduate research conference? Did you contribute to that part of the "learning environment" or did you toss the memo and decide that it was somebody else's job? Our undergraduate research paper sessions are not as fully supported as they need to be. There are not enough faculty sponsors and not enough faculty simply serving as an audience. I was once advised by an administrator that undergraduate research was not "part of our mission." Was that the voice of the future or the voice of the past? Participation in the next undergraduate research conference will be supportive of a more active learning environment.

Finally, if we are serious about faculty governance, we will make the Faculty Senate a genuinely deliberative body that shapes the most important policies of the university. But it won't happen without your involvement, your willingness to serve, your active participation on subcommittees. All our colleges need more full-time faculty serving in the Senate. Without them, we risk drifting back into a bureaucratically top-heavy environment where administrators are forced to dominate because the faculty refuses to take the opportunity given to it. Faculty are always encouraged to attend Senate meetings and to participate in debate.

The opportunities for active involvement are unlimited. If WCU seeks to become nationally renowned as a teaching and learning institution, everyone here must play an active role. Staff offices need to think about how they support the learning environment and take pride in the role they play. Librarians must be given the credit they deserve for helping students learn. The computer center would set up even more extensive World Wide Web access to faculty and students alike. Faculty would spend more time with honor societies to enhance the learning

environment and the image of the university. Teaching and learning would be valued over administrative power. We would extend our learning environment farther into the community. We would investigate ways for each student to have a personal, community, or faculty mentor throughout four years of undergraduate life. We would develop programs for students to come into close contact with professionals in the vocational field they hope to pursue through community mentors. We might pursue Bruce Henderson's idea that every student needs work experience before graduation. In short, we would take our mission seriously and propose programs that would implement that mission. We are in a period when everyone's ideas are needed.

We have a Chancellor who is inviting us to take an active role in making WCU whatever kind of institution we think it ought to and can become. But change won't happen without your active involvement.

Gordon Mercer, Political Science & Public Affairs

*Send responses to the Faculty Center by the 8th of the month.
Your responses will be published in **notes & quotes** on the 15th.*