



Faculty Forum

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Are We Moving From Shapes To Shadows?

The query before the house this season seems to be: "In how many ways is Western Carolina University unique?" The question is loaded with an assumption, and I would suggest that a question of equal importance is "where do we go from here?" Judy Stillion's **Forum** article was at least suggestive of that query; moreover, in dwelling on extravagant assertions of uniqueness, we could well find that we have moved, as Daniel Boorstin warns, "from shapes to shadows," entering the fogs of self-delusion.

The true challenge to us may be not so much to enumerate the ways in which Western is unique but to establish and as nearly as possible agree upon the essential character of our unique university, those ideals that will guide our future. In that, it is difficult to separate what we are from where we are. Western came to be, after all, because there was a need for educational opportunity in the remote, rural southwestern mountains of North Carolina, and Mr. Madison's school became essential to the filling of that need. In determining what we are, and what we want to be, we need to stay in touch with the rooted need for us, and to assure that we remain essential both to the region in which we are located and to the fulfillment of those academic ideals that we establish. The wisdom of establishing an essential place and role that only we can fill and play would soon become apparent if there were to be a scaled-down system of higher education in North Carolina.

We have, in times past, given collective thought to the essence of what we should be, and what we would like to be known for. We have, before, acknowledged that institutional mission -- perhaps, even, survival -- rests on an identity decision, defined both by what we are and what we are not, but most of all by what we would become. Historically, Western's faculty and administration, at crucial turning points, have joined to examine the issue of "where we go from here," and on the answers built enduring strengths.

Young Bobby Madison (he was 22) had a simple idea, an ideal, if you please, and on it built a school. He knew what he wanted his school to be when it grew up: a normal school for the preparation of teachers. It was a simple, strong, enduring ideal.

In 1951, that normal school, still a teachers college, faced the question: Where do we want to go from here? What do we want to be? That question was placed in the hands of the faculty Institutional Research Committee which entitled its 1952 report, "Where From Here?" On its recommendations Western took a new name, broadened degree studies in the liberal arts, sciences, and business, formalized graduate studies, and reinforced a public service commitment, all of which guided institutional fortunes specifically for the next fifteen years and exert strong influence even today. It was a strong, enduring ideal.

In 1965, Western again was asking, where do we go from here? And Paul Reid, who had returned for a second term as president, put the matter in the hands of a faculty group, pragmatically dubbed the "Where From Here?" committee. Its report, "Horizon 1980," laid a

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foundation for reorganizing the academic structure of the institution and for seeking and obtaining university status. It was a strong, enduring, focussing ideal.

Institutional image, in each instance, was the consequence of strong ideals, suggesting today that our image will continue to be the result of our ideals. If, to take as example a current point of discussion, we do not wish to be known as a place that affords educational opportunity to high school graduates who, in our congregation of them, have average SAT scores in the 800 block, then our academic ideals must not include offering that opportunity.

If, on the other hand, making that door of opportunity available is a Western ideal, and will continue to be our practice as well as our policy, then that practice undoubtedly will continue to be a major part of our image because no institution's image is greatly different from its reality. In our current set of goals, we list first the improvement of our quality, a strong ideal. In seeking to reflect an image, it is to that reality that we hold the mirror, and as we are beginning to see, the better the reality the better the reflection.

In his little book, **The Image: A Guide To Pseudo-Events In America**, (recommended reading) Boorstin laments that "the language of images is everywhere. Everywhere it has displaced the language of ideals....In discussing ourselves, our communities, our nation, our leaders, ourselves, we talk the language of images...." That language, he says, is a "devious, circumlocutory way of talking (that) has become common. We do not even notice it. In an earlier age critics would have objected simply that universities failed to pursue this ideal or that ideal. But today universities, like other institutions -- in fact like everybody -- are judged by whether they fit into a well-tailored 'image' of themselves."

In that context, have we in our current discussions become overly engrossed with accusatory self-flagellation on the one hand and autogenously hypnotic exultation on the other? At times, both those camps seem to have followers, and while the resulting dialogue is healthy, do we sometimes fail in our exchanges to distinguish between what is descriptive and what is prescriptive, between what we are and what some wish we were?

Most of us, I expect, want our reach to go well beyond our grasp, but Boorstin may have had it right when he cautioned that Americans "are ruled by extravagant expectations." We have, he says, "unprecedented opportunity to deceive ourselves and to befog our experience...we want and believe these illusions because we suffer from extravagant expectations....our expectations are extravagant in the precise dictionary sense of the word -- 'going beyond the limits of reason or moderation.' They are excessive."

Could it be that we are engaged, wittingly or not, once more in searching for realistic and reasonable ideals by which to shape our reality? If that is so, we need worry little about uniqueness, image, or the future; only in the lack of ideals would we have cause for enduring concern.

Doug Reed, Director of Public Information

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If you would like to respond to this opinion piece, please send your comments by the 8th of the month either to Doug at 423 HFR or to the FCTE. Please indicate whether you are willing to be quoted or prefer to remain anonymous.