

Living Up To Our Educational Commitments: What Makes Western Unique

My mother from rural Alabama had euphemisms and metaphors (often mixed) to describe almost any situation. One of her favorites--oft used for rebuke as well as affirmation--was, "It's as clear as the nose on your face!" As I attempt to address the question "What is unique about WCU?" my mother's favorite expression comes to mind. Is it as clear as the nose on our face?

My responsibilities for institutional marketing as well as undergraduate admissions, retention, and advising involve me continually in the assessment and identification of those areas which make WCU special or even unique. I also have had the good fortune to serve on Chancellor Coulter's committee to review and rewrite WCU's mission statement. And though I have only been at Western for three years, I have worked at three other very different schools in twenty-one years and believe that I have a perspective on WCU that is enhanced by time and place.

At other places where I have worked, the institution's mission statement and its public persona advanced in marketing and recruitment propaganda were diametrically opposed. And as one would anticipate under such conditions, dissonance ran rampant. Dr. Jekyll would confront Mr. Hyde at faculty meetings, budget hearings, or job searches. We have far less of this dissonance than any other place where I have worked or attended. We continue to debate the teaching versus research issue, but who doesn't? This is a healthy debate that reminds us at WCU of what we long ago settled in our mission statement and advance quite clearly in our public persona. "The most important activity at Western Carolina University is student-teacher involvement in *learning*. ***Students with a wide range of academic abilities and aptitudes may enter the university*** but those who are graduated are expected to be knowledgeable, competent in critical thinking and communications skills, aware of ethical and aesthetic values, and productive in employment and general life settings." This quote from our mission statement describes an institution that elevates the proposition of learning to lofty heights while acknowledging the challenges that accompany such an emphasis. What is unique about WCU? In public, we promote this commitment in ways far too numerous to mention, not the least of which is the forum you are now participating in.

Our mission statement does not neglect the importance of research and service--reference is made to these essential university elements at least five times--but it is clear that research, service, and teaching are framed in a larger context of **learning**, which includes **application of learning**. This emphasis on learning also acknowledges the challenge that we face as a regional university attempting to teach students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. I submit that this latter consideration definitely underlines our uniqueness.

As a former admissions officer and consultant for the College Board, I can safely argue that test scores should not be the sole consideration when we recruit, enroll, and graduate students in concert with our mission statement. We should enroll the very best students available to us, and our mission statement encourages us to enroll not only students who deserve a special opportunity but national merit scholars and students ranking in the top half of their graduating classes as well. Our commitments are the same for that national merit scholar as for that student who seems to be quite average. Our mission statement admonishes us to attract the best students as well as taking a chance on a student who could very well succeed here with assistance and support. I further submit that our unique culture at WCU enables us to deliver on this publicly stated mission. My favorite analogy in this respect is that WCU will take a student who is a 4 and graduate him or her as a 9 1/2. Other schools will enroll a student who is a 9 1/2 and graduate him or her as a 9 1/2 or a 10. Which school has done the better job?

But of course it is one thing to talk about lofty principles such as those articulated in our mission statement and quite another to look into that all-telling mirror to ask if we really measure up. Again, my travels and relative objectivity say that we most certainly and perhaps uniquely do measure up. Lest I sound like a writer under retainer by our Public Information Office, I quickly submit that I have carefully studied the important information assembled by our faculty and staff through our strategic planning process and data generated through our outcomes assessment program. Though space prevents a thorough demonstration in these pages, close attention to such data shows that we live up to the commitments in our mission statement. Granted, some of the assessment data need several years of validation or testing, but so far a synthesis of student impressions tells us the following:

* WCU is advertised to students as a place where skill development and value clarification is a central feature of undergraduate education, and although students are often not sure what general education is all about before they enrolled, they definitely find that WCU delivers on its promise.

* WCU is advertised as a place where the external environment emphasizes peace, security, and beauty, and when they get here students find the advertisement to be understated.

* WCU is advertised as a place where **competent and caring faculty believe in the importance of teaching**, and when they get here students hear over and over again that they should make a friend in the faculty. Some students develop many friends among the faculty.

Across the campus, as we evaluate our assessment information and simply listen to our supporters and competitors, we hear about **a university which lives up to its educational commitments and public persona. This is in itself unique** and should not be discounted. Some of our colleagues denigrate WCU as being ordinary or even substandard as an institution of higher learning. To them I say, look around you. Higher education is changing in this country and WCU is often leading the way in educational reform. Listen to the positive things our young faculty and students generally say about WCU. We have the courage to articulate who we are and who we serve, and this ain't the case everywhere! How are we unique? It's as clear (to me) as. . .well you know.

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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 Mike at 547 HFR or to Terry at the FCTE. Please indicate whether you are willing to be quoted or prefer to remain anonymous.