

A Culture of Silence

Remember the General Faculty Meeting a few weeks ago? I left thinking about the references to faculty voice, appreciating what Terry Kinnear, John Bardo, Gordon Mercer and other faculty had said about moving Western toward a more democratic form of faculty governance but wondering what faculty voice really means at Western. Do faculty have a voice at Western? If so, where is it heard? Certainly not at general faculty meetings, which are always presentations with air-tight agendas. When he apologetically advised us to get up and stretch in the middle of our first gathering of the year, Chancellor Bardo referred to ours as a "talking to" meeting.

I don't like "talking to" meetings, but I may have been corrupted by my experiences at a small private college where I used to teach, where faculty meetings usually involved messy heated debate. There was always an agenda, but the direction of the discussion was not prescribed, and efficiency was not the top priority. The meetings often went on too long, became repetitive, and sometimes were used as an occasion for posturing. Tasks did not always get finished, but the debates were vigorous and lively and helped develop a sense of shared community. I left those meetings sometimes frustrated and angry, other times exhilarated, and occasionally feeling that hard work had been satisfactorily completed.

In an earlier time I was a public school teacher, dismayed to find at "faculty meetings" that teachers sat in student chairs in a classroom and listened--acting very much like students ourselves as the principal talked to us. No pretensions of democracy existed here. These meetings were briefing sessions, pure and simple.

Western's general faculty meetings lie somewhere between these extremes. During my years at WCU, I may have been inspired by an odd speech or two, but I have never been worn out by the effort of a good argument. Fatigued by the tedium, yes. At the end of this year's opening meeting, I fantasized about raising my hand and asking a question along the lines of "have there been any administrative cuts to help pay for adjunct faculty?" Can you imagine someone from the floor asking a spontaneous question at the faculty meeting?

But faculty meetings are not the real problem; they are merely symptom and symbol of an impotent faculty. Dr. Bardo spoke of the faculty at Western as having low self-esteem. I'm still mulling that one over, but I have often felt that faculty acquiescence is rewarded and has resulted in a "culture of silence," characterized by faculty resistance to speak. Many untenured faculty have told me they will not feel free to speak up until they get tenure. Seven years is a long time to be quiet, and I wonder if anyone quiet and passive for so long will ever speak. I've also heard

tenured faculty say they won't speak out if they disagree with the administration. Some say they don't want the retribution of low raises and others say they gave up a long time ago. What's the point? they ask, cynically. They've learned from experience.

Perhaps faculty reticence is historical, going back to the early seventies when the faculty forced a chancellor out of office. Lore has it that he was replaced by an authoritarian chancellor who told faculty what to do, when to do it, and how to do it. But the large faculty turnover of the 80s and 90s would seem to argue against such an explanation. At my college faculty meeting the other day, the dean presented figures indicating that almost 50% of the present faculty began their jobs at WCU since the mid 1980s, long after the uprising of the early 70s became a faded memory.

The voicelessness of the faculty could be a result of a structure that prevents faculty power while protecting administrative power. I know of faculty--among the most vocal and respected on campus--who refuse to serve on certain committees because of severely frustrating past experiences. They took their charges seriously (for example TPR, Grievance, or Hearing Committees), and did a tremendous amount of work but were left feeling not only unheard but disregarded. Many of the important committees function only as advisory to the administration; their recommendations are only heard if the administrator in charge chooses to listen. The faculty end up having only a token voice ("yes, the faculty voted but the administration didn't like the result, so they ignored the vote"). Why bother if all that work, time, and effort are disregarded? Why not just retreat into your specialty and do the work that counts (teaching and research)? Let the administration run the university; they get paid to do so.

These attitudes (and I have been guilty of holding some of them myself) stand in the way of progress. Western is, after all, a place of teaching and learning where ideas should be discussed, debated, and deliberated. Universities help perpetuate democracy. If the faculty at a university are not free to use their voices, where will that freedom exist?

At last year's general faculty meeting, Terry Kinnear spoke of faculty rights and responsibilities, pointing out that every faculty member has the right as well as the responsibility to use his or her voice. We have a historic opportunity. The chancellor seems sincerely interested in faculty involvement in governance, and the head of the Faculty Senate takes faculty power very seriously. Several Forum Assemblies have been organized as an attempt at presenting the faculty voice. And even the general faculty meetings look different today: Rather than an intimidating panel of vice-chancellors presiding, we now have only one administrator on stage.

I'm advocating neither anarchy nor Quakerism, but if we are to reverse the culture of silence, we have to be willing to argue and disagree and debate. We have to send a clear message that sitting like sheep in faculty meetings is unacceptable. Nor is it wise to continue the protectionist tradition of playing the role of mere advisers. We need real change at both the structural level and the individual faculty level. In other words, Faculty Senate should work to establish faculty power, and individuals should use their voices regardless of tenure status, potential for retribution, or cynicism. If we want to transform the culture of faculty silence at WCU we had better start talking and working together for change.

Mary Jean Herzog--Administration, Curriculum, and Instruction

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, e-mail Nienhuis by the 8th of the month.