



Faculty Forum

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GRADUATE ASSISTANTS: A MANIFESTO

The Council of Graduate Schools estimates that about two thirds of the approximately 1.5 million graduate students nationally hold an assistantship, but the duties and expectations of such assistantships vary so widely that generalizations about the experience are not possible. That number is significantly lower at WCU (approximately 15% of our entire graduate student population hold assistantships; approximately 45% of eligible graduate students). In part, this differential stems from Western's position as a State Comprehensive University (SCU) rather than a research-intensive institution.¹ Furthermore, some faculty see graduate training as the last bastion that is truly the domain of the academic scholar, free from outside influences that may sully the purity of its imparting of knowledge. This is not to say that good work has not been done in researching graduate education, but rather to point out that models for doing work in this area are few and far between. In specific areas, such as graduate assistant training and development, bibliographies are very short.²

The role and development of graduate assistants has been overlooked at comprehensive universities, at least in part because it has largely been overlooked everywhere.³ As the 'learning centered revolution' marches on, graduate education as a whole has been one of the last frontiers for research and certainly the area in which, generally, the least amount of reform has taken place. The impetus for educational reform began with secondary education and then transitioned out into higher education, putting graduate education margins of institutionalized educational reform. We can see this here at Western with the QEP's initial focus on undergraduate education and student outcomes. Fortunately, WCU's QEP, under Carol Burton's leadership, is also now developing and piloting in select programs graduate education outcomes that compliment our undergraduate QEP focus.

In his recent book, *Teaching at the People's University*, Bruce Henderson suggests that SCUs lack the clout and funding of Research I and II level institutions and the specific mission and/or traditions of community college or liberal arts colleges. Born as teachers' colleges, the mission of the SCU expanded following the huge influx of students into higher education after World War II. Henderson argues that SCUs suffer from this position as a "youngest child" and that where they fail, they do so because they try too hard to be like these other institutions and do not feel sufficiently comfortable to differentiate their own values and identity.⁴ The awkwardness is compounded when examining graduate programs at SCU's. By definition, comprehensive universities offer a variety of graduate programs at the Master's level but few, if any, PhD programs. While most graduate programs

¹ The term comprehensive university comes from the classification of institutions of higher education done by the Carnegie Foundation. Carnegie recently changing their nomenclature and what had been called comprehensive universities are now referred to, for the most part, as Masters I level institutions. For more information on the designations and the reasons for the switch, see Carnegie Foundation FAQs (<http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/about/sub.asp?key=18&subkey=405>).

² The best bibliography I have found was compiled by Gabriel Power at the Center for Teaching Effectiveness at the University of Delaware. <http://cte.udel.edu/docs/TABibliography.doc>.

³ E. Wert, "Foreward," in M. Marincovich, et al (ed) *The Professional Development of Graduate Teaching Assistants* (Boston: Anker, 1998), xvii-xxii. See also the now somewhat dated overview in R.D. Abbott, et al. "Review of Research on TA Training" *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 29 (1998), 111-124.

⁴ Bruce Henderson, *Teaching at the People's University*, 10.

are patterned after their counterparts at Research I institutions that offer PhDs, little to no work has been done to find a distinctive identity for graduate programs in fulfilling the mission of public comprehensive institutions.⁵

In the 1980s, the first conference specifically devoted to graduate assistant training and development took place at Ohio State and the national-level Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) initiative was launched as a joint project by the Association of Colleges and Universities and the Council of Graduate Schools. This multi-year, multi-million dollar project encouraged participating institutions to develop and disseminate innovative models for providing comprehensive training and development for graduate teaching assistants. Today, the conversation has been extended to include efforts to develop graduate teaching assistants into broader conversations about the future of higher education, and the raised profile of faculty and teacher professional development. When these efforts have been somewhat productive, their productivity has been aimed largely at the Research I, doctoral degree granting institutions, as the designation “Preparing Future Faculty” suggests. Despite the money and attention, few, if any, workable models have emerged from PFF that apply to institutions such as WCU and many of our departments continue to use graduate assistants to perform unpleasant duties that faculty do not want to do, from inappropriate administrative tasks to (at least in legends about which our graduate students whisper) performing non-academic related duties.

What PFF discovered is that graduate students benefit most from assistantships that offer training in ‘soft’ or people skills, teacher development, time management, reflective practices, and networking and/or mentoring. Interestingly, these skills coincide almost directly with the skills a North Carolina Employment Commission survey say employers are looking for with new hires. The current model for graduate education at SCUs, based on the Research I paradigm, emphasizes product over process, research over teaching, publications over professional development, and perhaps even yard work and filing over reflection. The majority of our 2000 graduate students will not become tenure-track faculty (if the national statistics are accurate) and most of them do not intend to do so. In other words, we train graduate students at an institution much different than where we did our own graduate work, so our ideas about graduate education do not fit either our mission or the goals of our students. What we have to recognize is the need for more graduate training at the regional comprehensive level for those graduate students who are very likely going to face a work place with different priorities than we face as faculty members. Some of our graduate programs at WCU have taken steps down this road. This is certainly true in the professional programs like Physical Therapy and the MS in Technology program, which requires their graduate students to engage with and serve the community. It is also true in programs like English’s Professional Writing program, which brings local business needs into the classroom and provides in-house teacher training for writing.

In the past three years, the Graduate School has taken a first step towards promoting these “soft” skills through the GATE program and by requiring job descriptions that relate to the assistant’s program of study. Less than 25% of graduate students nationally claim to be satisfied with the training and development they received as graduate assistants and the numbers are even lower at regional comprehensive universities such as ours. If any of us received such low marks for our teaching or research, we would no longer be employed. Simply put, we need to train our graduate students better and we need to come up with a development model for graduate assistants who work for our institution. For example, faculty developing grants that engage our communities might make better use of graduate assistants in those grants, allowing the students the opportunity to develop discipline-related skills as part of the work, to promote community development and to become stewards of their environment. We encourage you, as you work on your plans to address WCU’s QEP and students’ intentional learning, that you include your graduate students and your graduate program curriculum in that discussion.

Laura Cruz, Associate Professor of History
Scott Higgins, Dean of the Graduate School

⁵One of the few is Phyllis R. Freeman and Jan Z. Schmidt, “An Interdisciplinary Teaching Assistant Training Program at a MA Institution,” *The Journal of Graduate Teaching Assistant Development* 7 (3) 2000.

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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 e-mail vguise@wcu.edu by the 15th of the month following publication of the article you wish to respond to.

Responses to the December feature article by John West and Laura Huff:

DO MORE TO ESCAPE STRESS – AND KILL YOUR TV WHILE YOU'RE AT IT

The December article by Laura Huff and John West—Escape Stress—Kill you TV was an excellent article and very timely. I fear, though, since we received NO faculty feedback, that most folks were too stressed to take the time to read it! Now that the holidays are behind us, a new year, and in some ways perhaps, a whole new America has begun, I hope faculty will take a moment and read Laura and John's article. Why not make a New Year's resolution to lay down that stack of papers, set aside all those household tasks that keep calling, kill that new 50" flat screen that Santa brought and get you and at least one other person down to the Fine and Performing Arts Center to one of the excellent events scheduled for this New Year? Come on now, responsibilities will wait while we get a life!

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