



Faculty Forum

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Are WCU Faculty Ready for Self-Governance in Peer Review?

**David McCord, Psychology Department
Chair of the Faculty Senate**

Shared governance is traditionally described as a multiplayer game, including the faculty, the university administration, and the governing board, each with its own primary domain (but with voice in the domains of the other two partners). The history of the faculty role in university governance is long and convoluted, as described recently by William G. Bowen and Eugene M. Tobin (former presidents of Princeton University and Hamilton College, respectively) in their excellent 2015 book, *Locus of Authority: The Evolution of Faculty Roles in the Governance of Higher Education*. Historically, and looking forward, one theme is very clear: faculty members themselves are primarily responsible for the selection, advancement, and termination of their peers.

Here at Western, somewhat weirdly, we have chosen to abdicate a portion of this responsibility from the outset. Briefly, considering tenure candidates for example, we have collegial review at the department, college, and university levels. At the department level all committee members are elected, and their vote advises the Department Head (*Faculty Handbook* 4.07.D.1.a). At the college level, however, we elect only half of the committee members, with the other half being appointed by the Dean (4.07.D.2.b). The vote of the college-level CRC is advisory to the Dean, who appointed half of the membership. The same holds true at the university level, with members elected from each college and an equal number appointed by the Provost (4.07.D.3.a). In summary, we democratically elect from our own ranks 100% of the voting members at the department level, 50% of the voting members at the college/school level, and somewhat less than 50% of voting members at the university level (because the Dean of the Graduate School is automatically appointed to this committee, as a voting member).

Why do we choose to do this? It seems clear that, as rank-and-file faculty members, we are not confident that we could manage this critically important task responsibly, so we turn to our administrators to protect the institution and protect us from ourselves. Really?

One pseudo-rationale for this procedure is that having a substantial counterbalance of administratively appointed members is a way of assuring fair representation of women and minorities who, for various reasons, may not be adequately represented in an open election process. This is a noble sentiment that is not supported by the empirical data. A review of the

recent several years of data available regarding members of the university-level CRC indicates no differences in gender and minority composition of elected versus appointed groups.

The truth lies at a deeper level, and it is not a comfortable truth. One way to think about this issue is the realization that some very conscientious, serious faculty members who have the welfare of the institution in mind and thus provide rigorous peer review and “no” votes when warranted develop a reputation for doing so and then don’t get elected for CRC duty. I can name one or two in my own college who would likely never get elected by the faculty at large but are always appointed by the Dean (across several Deans in my history here) because of the rigorous review they characteristically bring to the table. Another way to think about this is that in our daily lives we are encouraged to be supportive of each other and formative in our evaluations of peers; “collegiality” is even written into our *Faculty Handbook* now. Thus, many people find it very hard to vote “no” on reappointment or tenure, relying on the Dean and their crotchety appointees to make the hard calls so we don’t have to.

To be sustainable, self-governance requires a level of responsibility and accountability that strains us. In the case of peer review, this means a willingness to carefully and objectively review the performance data on our colleagues, to consider the long-term welfare of WCU, and to honestly ask ourselves if reappointment or tenure for the faculty member under review is a responsible action in light of the enormous commitment of public resources entailed. If we decide to pursue fully-elected collegial review committees at all levels, we must simultaneously commit to accepting the responsibility and accountability required.

The Faculty Senate currently has a resolution on the table that proposes fully elected committees at all levels. The Collegial Review Council of the Senate is discussing and debating this issue at this time and will report to the Senate late fall semester or early spring semester regarding their deliberations and recommendations. This is a critically important issue, in itself and as an exemplar of the faculty role in shared governance generally. Are we up to it? We will hold an open forum within a future Senate meeting to encourage all interested faculty to weigh in on the issue before we vote. In parallel, comments in response to this *Faculty Forum* article would be a great way to share thoughts and move the conversation forward in a transparent, engaged manner. Please contribute to the conversation by responding to this article (mherzog@wcu.edu). You can also do so by contacting your own Faculty Senate representative(s), by emailing the Chair of the Collegial Review Council Mary Kay Waters (mkbauer@wcu.edu), or by emailing me directly (mccord@wcu.edu).

Editor's Note: The Faculty Forum is published monthly by the Coulter Faculty Commons to provide opportunities for the WCU community to converse about issues of the day ranging from academic matters to faculty policies and community concerns.

The Faculty Forum is in its 28th year of publication. While its original purpose was to “spark a lively dialogue about college teaching,” even in its earliest days, the subjects went far beyond teaching tips and techniques. It has often been a catalyst for revealing and resolving campus problems such as salary inequities and the status of fixed-term faculty. See the CFC [publications website](#) to read past issues.

Thanks to David McCord, Chair of the Faculty Senate, for this month’s provocative commentary, a challenge to the faculty to have a stronger voice in peer review. Send me your responses for publication in the November issue.

**Mary Jean Ronan Herzog,
Faculty Fellow for Publications
mherzog@wcu.edu**

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