



# FACULTY FORUM

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**Note From the Editor**  
**Chris Cooper, Political Science and Public Affairs**

I am pleased to introduce the next issue of the Faculty Forum. Our first piece in this issue is a terrific overview of faculty governance issues from our outgoing Faculty Senate Chair, David McCord. In this contribution, David doesn't shy away from the difficult issues facing our campus, while simultaneously striking an optimistic note for the future of faculty governance at Western. If you care at all about faculty/administration relations, curriculum, tenure and promotion, or faculty governance more generally, David's piece is worth your time.

In this second article, I am taking advantage of final exams to offer a few of my own thoughts about grading at Western—with a macro-look at grade distributions at WCU from Fall, 2015. I am hoping that this piece will help us put some data to what a lot of folks have wondered about and will help guide a larger conversation about how we assess student learning and student achievement.

My intention was to close this issue with the third installment of the book forum—this time featuring *Aspiring Adults Adrift* (the follow-up to *Academically Adrift*). I am pleased that Niall Michelsen agreed to participate in the book forum and his insightful piece appears here. Unfortunately, in a turn of events that reminded me of high school prom, I was turned down a number of times when seeking out a second participant—understandable given all that's going on at the end of the semester. While Niall's piece stands alone in this issue, I plan to move back to the 2-3 person book forums in the future. With that in mind, if you'd like to participate next year, please let me know.

And speaking of next year, we've got a number of interesting issues planned for next year, and I am particularly pleased that the first issue will feature Mimi Fenton, Leroy Kauffman, and Brian Railsback all reflecting on what their experiences as Dean can teach us about being more effective faculty. If you've got other ideas, please send them to me—these can be original thoughts or reflections on any of the ideas expressed in previous issues, including this one.

Lastly, although I probably don't need to remind you, I will anyway: the views expressed here are those of the authors not necessarily consistent with the opinions of the Faculty Commons, Click and/or Clack, the Chancellor's Office, the Board of Trustees, any of the folks making that movie in downtown Sylva, Prince, Merle Haggard, the faculty senate, me (except for the one I wrote), or anyone else.

Have a great summer,

-Chris

## Shared Governance Revisited

**David M. McCord, Faculty Senate Chair, and Professor of Psychology**

This has been a significant year in the Faculty Senate, particularly with regard to the role of the faculty in shared governance of the university. As a reminder, shared governance formally refers to the active collaboration among faculty, administrators, and the board of overseers in making decisions about university goals, policies, and operations. The concept of shared governance (along with tenure and academic freedom) is central to the success of American colleges and universities. At WCU we have modified this traditional model by incorporating a strong presence and voice of staff as well. On most issues the perspective of the faculty aligns reasonably well with that of our staff colleagues and the administration; collaboration and cooperation are by far the most common, and most effective, strategies used in governing. However, it is essential for the faculty to work internally to articulate an *independent faculty voice* on important issues. As we consider the various complex issues and challenges facing the university, we as faculty have some unique perspectives and responsibilities with regard to its primary mission and long-term identity.

My own view is that faculty members should be alert and attentive to everything going on in the university, with a willingness to get involved and help out. However, we should focus specifically on two key aspects of university life on which our voice is the most relevant: (1) *peer review*, including the selection, advancement, and termination of faculty members; and (2) the *curriculum* of the university. It is not my purpose here to summarize all of the work of the Faculty Senate this year, but I would like to highlight a couple of key achievements in the context of these two areas of key responsibility.

First, we were able to substantially modify our tenure and promotion process by eliminating the administratively appointed committee members, resulting in fully-elected collegial review committees at the department/school, college, and university levels. This historic change requires modifications to the Faculty Handbook, to university voting procedures, and to departmental collegial review documents. Symbolically, this represents our stepping up to fully take responsibility for the tenure and promotion of our peers, rather than relying on our administrators to protect us from ourselves. The Collegial Review Council of the Faculty Senate deserves our thanks for successfully working through this complex and impactful process.

Second, we have had a very engaging year together in our efforts to evaluate the impact on the university of a potential external gift of about 2 million dollars funding a new center for free enterprise. Using a narrow definition of academic freedom, our current gift policies may not have even required any faculty review of this gift. However, it is essential to understand that the faculty are primarily responsible for the *curriculum* of the university, though the definition of curriculum is not entirely clear. Certainly it is more than a list of courses and descriptions and program requirements. A broad view is that the curriculum is the entirety of the student's learning experiences associated with the university. Thus, the establishment of a new center has curricular impact, and hiring of new faculty has major, long-term impact on the curriculum. This was a very difficult issue for the Senate and for the faculty in general, as this presented us with a rare case in which a significant majority of the faculty were directly opposed to the position

taken by our administration. Although this specific issue remains unresolved, I want to note here that much has been achieved with regard to shared governance as a result of this debate and discussion. We are almost finished with a substantial revision of Policy 104, describing faculty involvement in assessing potential gifts to the university. We are well into the revision of Policy 105, describing the process to be followed when a new center or institute is established. With regard to the new Center for Study of Free enterprise itself, we have established an Advisory Board that has substantial, ongoing representation by elected faculty from across all colleges. These are policy changes that will redefine faculty involvement in these processes well into the future.

Let me close on a positive note. While this year has included some uncomfortable debate and conflict, sometimes that is necessary. And as we end the year, I want to emphasize the high level of cooperation and collaboration that has also occurred. Though we protested the process by which the free enterprise center was so rapidly established, the uniquely strong advisory board structure was developed and proposed by the Provost herself and was implemented in a very smooth, collaborative process by the Faculty Senate and Provost's Office together. The major revisions of Policy 104 and Policy 105 require extensive, sometimes groundbreaking work by our Office of Legal Affairs, and we are working in a very positive, collegial manner with the attorneys in this process. The role of the faculty in all of these important matters is now seen in an entirely new light, which will benefit the university substantially in future years.

These achievements highlight the fact that there are three parts to our job: teaching, productive scholarship, AND service, with the last category including service to the institution itself. Please consider contributing to the faculty voice, by running for Senate yourself, by taking on service roles in other university-level endeavors, and, importantly, by taking your voting privilege seriously as you select colleagues who are most likely to contribute in a meaningful, responsible way to the independent voice of the faculty in shared governance.

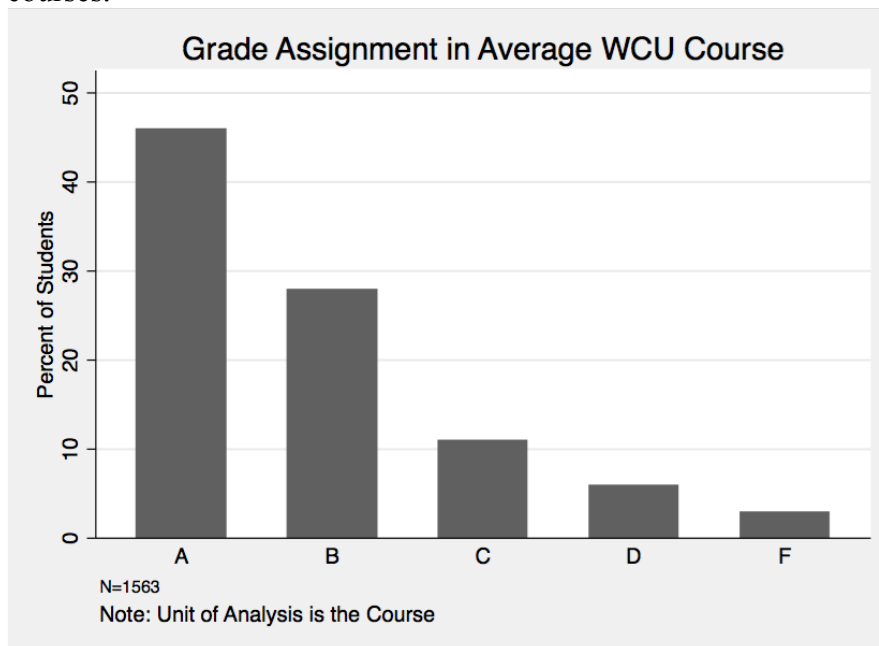
## A Macro Look at Grading at Western

**Chris Cooper, Professor and Department Head, Political Science and Public Affairs**

If you're like me, grading has dominated the majority of conversations with colleagues over the past few weeks—well, that and plagiarism. This time of year we are obsessed with assigning one grade to one student at a time. Each individual grade is supposed to reflect learning, or at least mastery of the material. While the majority of us are currently thinking about grading at the micro level, I thought it might be instructive to reflect on grading at the macro level to see what sorts of patterns emerge when we examine all WCU course grades together.

To conduct this analysis, I downloaded all section grades from the Banner report portal for Fall, 2015. I then excluded all graduate courses and all courses with fewer than 5 students. It's important to note that what I'm reporting here is the average by class. In other words, a class with 100 students is weighted the same as one with 20 students. And, to make these data easier to interpret, I combined pluses and minuses with the base grade (in other words, when I reference an "A" below, I mean an A+, A, or A-, and when I reference a "B", I mean B+, B, or B-, and so on). With those caveats out of the way, here is some quick analysis with six quick takeaways.

1. **The most commonly assigned grade at WCU is an A.** In the average undergraduate course at WCU, 46 percent of the students earn As and 28 percent earn Bs.<sup>1</sup> According to the WCU undergraduate catalog, that means that 46 percent of our students complete work that can be described as "excellent" and almost three in every four students are assessed as above satisfactory. See below for average course grades for more than 1500 courses.



<sup>1</sup> In 4 percent of our courses every student earns an A.

2. **There are large differences between colleges.** In one college, 38 percent of the students in an average section are assigned a final grade of an A. In another college, this number exceeds 60 percent. These are, of course, the extreme examples, but point is that grade assignment displays very different patterns across colleges.
3. **There are large differences within colleges.** Average grade assignment varies tremendously not just between, but also within colleges. Within a single college, the average course in department X assigns As to 46 percent of its students, while in department Y, just over 25 percent of students in the average class are assigned an A.
4. **There are large differences within departments.** In department X above, there are course sections where 7 percent of its students received As and other courses where 100 percent of the students received As. Differences of approximately the same magnitude are present in Department Y. In fact, across the university, the within department variation is greater than the between department variation.
5. **There are large differences within liberal studies categories.** Students who sign up for a class in the same liberal studies category can expect a grade distribution that varies from no students earning As to one where 80 percent of the students earn an A.
6. **There are large differences between course sections within the same course.** There are numerous examples of this, but one popular liberal studies course has sections where 4 percent of the students receive As and sections where over 90 percent of the students receive As.

So, what does this all mean? It may not mean much. After all, our university-level grade distributions mirror national data.<sup>2</sup> Faced with questions about grade distributions that skewed far higher than ours, Harvard faculty responded with a shrug.<sup>3</sup> We also know that different classes have different personalities and different aptitudes. Some variation is to be expected—both within and between departments. Further, if grades are a reflection of learning, then perhaps some faculty are simply better teachers than others (thus, their students achieve more and are assessed more positively).

Nonetheless, I believe that this quick analysis suggests that a broader conversation about grades may be beneficial. I'm not suggesting a task force (please, no more task forces), nor a forum (please, no more forums), but perhaps just a series of informal conversations between faculty and within departments. These conversations could wrestle with questions like: what does it mean that the choice of courses, sections, and professors within a given liberal studies category may influence a student's overall GPA? What does it mean that some departments tend to give higher grades than others? What do we/should we tell new faculty about grades and grade distributions? What kinds of conversations are departments having about grade assignments? We may ultimately conclude that business as usual is just fine, but I still think that

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<sup>2</sup> Nationally, ~46% of grades are As. For these and lots of other data and analysis on grades, see [gradeinflation.com](http://gradeinflation.com), a site maintained by Stuart Rojstaczer, a former Duke Professor, and author of the extremely depressing book, *Gone for Good*.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2013/12/6/faculty-defend-grade-inflation/>

spending some time discussing the macro-level trends in grading will ultimately help us be more intentional in how we assess student work.

**Book Symposium Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Aspiring Adults Adrift: Tentative Transitions of College Graduates*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.**

**Niall Michelsen, Associate Professor, Political Science and Public Affairs**

If you have turned to this issue of the *Faculty Forum* to find a recommendation for fun summer reading, you will likely be disappointed. Despite its title *Aspiring Adults Adrift* is not a gripping account of human perseverance in the face of indomitable natural forces. Rather it is a data driven evaluation of how well college graduates of the 2009 class are making the transition to adulthood. Lest you turn away too quickly, the final chapter does (with supporting data) discuss the mating habits of these youngsters.

If the book is not for everyone, it might be recommended reading for every academic department on our campus. Our new QEP Courses to Careers will necessitate that we think carefully and thoroughly about what the keys to success are for our graduates, and how we might measure how well we are doing in preparing them for success. *Aspiring Adults Adrift* provides useful questions and approaches for us as we embark upon this enterprise.

*Aspiring Adults Adrift* is a follow up to the widely discussed and controversial *Academically Adrift* 2011 book of sociologists Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa. The first book famously claimed that college students were not learning much. This book reports that the 2009 graduates experienced a mixed bag as they attempted to begin their careers. This is not surprising since that class had the misfortune to graduate into the worst economic recession in living memory. To their advantage they had the academic credential that placed them in better position than their non-college cohort.

Data for the first book was drawn primarily from the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) administered to college students by the Social Science Research Council from a national sample of representative institutions conducted between 2005 and 2009. This newer book takes the same cohort of students (918 in total) from the graduating class of 2009 and surveys them in 2010 and 2011. They conducted additional interviews with 80 graduates to supplement the surveys. For those who are interested, the narrative text of the book is roughly 140 pages with an additional 70 pages covering the methodology, statistical results and survey instruments.

The central data used by the authors, drawn from the CLA is not universally accepted. The authors claim that the CLA is the best, even if imperfect, instrument to accurately measure learning in generic categories such as critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills. Others are skeptical of whether the CLA delivers results sufficient to justify those claims. Those who wish to pursue this particular debate can begin with the Pascarella et al article cited below. WCU has administered the CLA three times and those results can be accessed at:

<http://www.wcu.edu/learn/office-of-the-provost/oipe/surveys/index.asp>. The CLA is a product of the Council for Aid to Education and can be accessed at: <http://cae.org/about/mission/>.

Along with CLA scores, the authors use College Selectivity and Major as critical independent variables. The most interesting chapter for WCU faculty addresses the graduates' success in the job market. They examine quantitative (are the jobs full-time or part-time) and qualitative (are the jobs ones that typically require a college education) measures of employment success. It is important to note that the authors exclude those who are back in school full-time from their analyses. This represents 30% of the total survey who were in graduate school full-time in 2011. This impacts their results when evaluating the role of collegiate major on the success of graduates since there is variance in this across major fields (e.g., high grad school for Science/Math, low for Business).

In short, they find that College Selectivity is positively correlated with employment success, as is high scores on the CLA. They found variation among the different categories of collegiate majors, with Business having the best chance to find full-time employment and Communications/Others having the worst. When looking at employment in skilled occupations, Engineering/Computer Science graduates did best and Science/Math graduates fared worst. These results have to be seen in light of the strong impact the authors find on the importance of high CLA scores on employment success. This, along with the exclusion of students continuing on to graduate and professional school from the analysis, leads the authors to conclude "While those committed to traditional models of liberal arts education have long argued that the development of generic competencies is useful for citizenship and for graduates' capacity to live full and meaningful individual lives, we have shown that these skills also have labor market payoffs over and above the specific fields of study chosen." (134)

The congruence of our new QEP and this book lie in their shared concern that college students are not being well prepared for life after college. Our adoption of Courses to Careers demonstrates our commitment to the well-being of our students beyond their time with us. While we hope that future graduates will not be as unlucky as the class of 2009, they will predictably be facing rising tuition costs and student loan burdens while entering an economy that has is increasingly competitive. The survey and interview results presented in the book indicate that a large percentage (23%) of college graduates are either unemployed or underemployed two years out from college. Still these numbers are better than for similarly-aged people without college degrees. But, clearly there is work to be done. And we can expect parents and legislatures to exert more pressure on us to demonstrate the value added of our undergraduate education.

On some matters the authors part company with our QEP. For instance the QEP Whitepaper says it "will focus on four life-skills: social responsibility; financial literacy; building positive interpersonal relationships, and improving self-awareness (2)." Meanwhile Arum and Roksa worry about "the extent to which social, not academic, engagement dominates campus life for most students (14)." Rather they encourage us to focus on: Critical Thinking; Complex Reasoning; and Writing Skills (134). The differences are not so great as to render the book useless to our endeavors. For instance, the authors accept "social responsibility" as a legitimate



goal of college education. They discuss it in the context of civic engagement and report their mixed findings on this count as well.

This is a valuable book that we can utilize as a jumping off point as we try to fashion our undergraduate education so that our students are well prepared to navigate a competitive and global marketplace. Reading *Aspiring Adults Adrift with Courses to Careers* in mind reminds us that we need a balance between traditional academic rigor and skills and the life skills at the center of our new QEP.

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