



FACULTY FORUM

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

Welcome to another issue of the Faculty Forum and to another year at Western Carolina University. For those who are new to Western, the faculty forum is a publication of, by, and for the faculty of Western Carolina University. Over the last few years, it's addressed important issues including the university's reaction to diversity issues, the state of grade inflation at WCU, and the place of the lecture in a 21st century learning environment. The contents are never censored and, at least in my time as Faculty Forum editor, university administration has been uniformly supportive of this as an outlet for faculty voice and opinion. If you're interested in contributing to a future issue of the Faculty Forum, please let me know.

The first article is by Associate Dean of the College of Business and Professor of Business Law, Debra Burke and Alexandra Watson, Graduate Programs Coordinator for the College of Business. Burke and Watson's piece addresses a question that a number of us have been faced with over the years: whether to move a program online. Their description of the process of moving the Business Administration and Law degree online is a story of success, and should provide fodder for other programs considering such a move.

The next article is by Associate Professor of Political Science and Public Affairs and Director of Liberal Studies Assessment, Jennifer Schiff. Dr. Schiff's piece provides a case for the importance of assessment in helping us improve the student experience in our liberal studies courses and outlines the improvements that we're implementing this year. Given the recent campus conversations around assessment, this is a must-read article for anyone who wants to know how WCU is improving our assessment and more importantly, why improving assessment matters.

The third and final article is a collaborative effort by Hunter Library's Elizabeth Marcus and Russ Binkley of the School of Teaching and Learning. Their article provides a wonderful primer about WCU's efforts to improve the experience of one of our most important and most vulnerable student populations—first generation college students.

As always, the opinions expressed here are those of the authors. The Faculty Commons and the university supports this publication as a place for open dialogue among faculty, but does not necessarily agree with or condone the content or opinions expressed here. I expect all of these articles will generate significant campus conversations—if you would like to respond to either of them in the next issue of the Forum, please let me know.

-Chris

Going Online: The Case of Business Administration and Law

By Debra Burke and Alexandra Watson, College of Business

The Business Administration & Law program went online in the fall of 2015. Prior to the degree's online debut, the discipline offered the Business Law minor in a distance format to test whether or not there might be interest in the major. Because enrollment in the minor suggested the major could generate traction, the Business Law faculty, along with administration, proposed the degree program for online delivery. The business core courses for the BSBA were already being offered online in support of the degree in Entrepreneurship. Those online courses, coupled with the Law prefixed courses that had been developed for the minor, made the transition to delivering the degree fairly seamless.

The program has grown from 39 students in its first semester to 225 students in the spring of 2018, over forty more students than the residential program. One strategy employed in the beginning was to split code a couple of sections of business law courses each semester to allow both residential and distance students to enroll. Although the preferred method of teaching residential students during the regular terms is face-to-face, this brief modification allowed the online program time to grow without imposing a negative impact on the program's SCH production. Additionally, split coding a few sections each semester delayed the need for additional faculty until the online sections hit full capacity.

Generating growth in a program stresses not only the teaching function of faculty, but also their advising function. For this reason, the college hired a part-time professional advisor to help students with class registration, which has proven to be key to the initiative's success. Typically, distance students require more communication with an advisor than residential students, who have the benefit of an informal network on campus. The advisor for distance students is often the first contact for students, and acts as a lifeline for a lot of issues that arise as they work to complete their program. In less than two years, this position expanded from part-time to full-time, and now supports the College's distance graduate programs (3) and undergraduate programs (2) in various ways. An alumnus of WCU's Master of Public Affairs program, Alexandra Watson, currently helps over 400 distance students, including those 200+ BLAW majors! Business Law faculty often teach overloads to meet the demand, and would be overly taxed if they each had to absorb an additional 30-40 advisees, as well.

The program also has been fortunate to recruit and leverage some talented adjunct faculty as supplemental instructors, including professors at Michigan State, the University of Detroit Mercy, and a recently retired air force colonel and staff judge advocate who recently taught a topics course on Air and Space Law. The program faculty are enthusiastic about its growth, and welcome the opportunity to offer place-bound learners another opportunity for completing an undergraduate degree in business from WCU!

Making a Case for Liberal Studies: The Case for Assessment

By Jennifer Schiff, Department of Political Science and Public Affairs

In graduate school I participated in a general education pilot program on our campus. This program introduced a new interdisciplinary course on the global environment and was required for all 2,700 first-year students. I was one of 35 teaching assistants assigned to teach three sections of the course per semester, and the pilot program was set for a four-year trial period – scheduled for evaluation by a university committee at its end in order to gauge its success and decide on its renewal.

It became evident to me quite early on that, in the face of daunting resistance from both faculty and students, a successful final evaluation of the course would absolutely hinge on the data generated during its run – peer evaluations, student evaluations, evidence of relationship to student learning outcomes, etc. All of these data points would help to make a case that the course was achieving what it set out to achieve – a universal integrative general education experience for students. Unfortunately, in my four years with the program, no such data were ever collected. Indeed, at the end of the pilot, the course runner was unable to offer empirical evidence of the program’s successes (and there *were* successes – although anecdotal, I witnessed them firsthand). This resulted in the evaluating committee’s skepticism and disapproval, and the course entered the history books as a failed experiment. For me, this experience provided an early lesson on the significance and impact of general education within a university’s curriculum, as well as the importance of its assessment. These lessons have stayed with me and continue to inform the way I think about and approach my current work with WCU’s Liberal Studies Program (LSP).

I believe strongly in the value of Western’s Liberal Studies Program. The courses within the program teach our students how to speak and write with confidence and authority, how to think critically and solve what seem to be insurmountable problems in the world, and how to engage with their fellow citizens to define and work toward a more just and equitable society. Truly, these are all skills which students can and should take within them into any future career or life experience. To this end, I’ve oriented much of my university service around general education -- I’ve been a member of WCU’s Liberal Studies Committee (LSC) for the past three years, and I’ve served as the committee’s chair for the past two years.

While I celebrate the successes of Liberal Studies and am inspired by them, I’ve observed also that Liberal Studies sometimes struggles to convince the campus community of its importance within the larger university curriculum. In my opinion, this is due, in part, to a lack of empirical data measuring the impact Liberal Studies courses have on Western’s students. In the absence of such evidence, it is difficult to state with confidence whether the LSP is a coherent collection of courses oriented around specific learning objectives or to draw conclusions as to whether Western’s students are developing those fundamental skills advocated by the program’s student learning outcomes.

And it’s critical to the future of the LSP to try and answer these questions, perhaps most importantly because of the breadth and impact of the program itself. Western’s Liberal

Studies consists of approximately 250 courses, and its size means that it touches almost every student experience and almost every department at the university. With such a large presence, it is worth at least trying to determine whether we are delivering to students the content and skills we believe we are. As an additional incentive, the accreditation process requires program assessment, as SACS-COC comprehensive standard 8.2.b states that for general education competencies, the university must “identify expected outcomes, assess the extent to which it achieves these outcomes, and provide evidence of seeking improvement.”¹

For its part, LSC has engaged in assessment of the program for at least a decade. The most recent iteration of this process began in 2014, when the LSC began to require assessment reports designed to evaluate student learning with the intent of better measuring whether we are delivering what we say we do in Liberal Studies and whether students are learning what we want them to.²

It is telling that the most recent assessment reports received have shied away from the measurement of student learning and instead have (justifiably, in my opinion) tended to highlight flaws in the *process of assessment*, suggesting that the LSC needs to improve, among other things, 1) the timeliness and efficiency of data collection, 2) communication with the campus community, and 3) the clarity of the Liberal Studies student learning outcomes and rubrics themselves.

The LSC took to heart these recommendations, and in response, the committee approved during the spring 2018 semester revised and streamlined student learning outcomes for the LSP. These outcomes are in the process of being rolled out over the coming academic year, and you will likely hear much more about them over the next several months.

It is in this spirit of progressive improvement that, over the summer, WCU sent a team to the AAC&U’s Institute on General Education and Assessment. I was a member of this team, alongside Carol Burton (Acting Provost), Gael Graham (History), Erin McNelis (Mathematics and Computer Science), and Terry Martin (Stage and Screen).

During the conference, our team created a process and timeline to achieve the following goals:

- The creation of entirely new assessment plan, with an improved reporting structure and a three-year cycle of assessment, rather than the current five-year model.
- Improved communication between the LSP and the campus community.
- A more intentional integration of Liberal Studies across disciplines and programs.
- The creation of dedicated position within the Liberal Studies program to guide future assessment efforts in a consistent manner.
- The implementation of summer workshop dedicated to scoring student Liberal Studies artifacts, and the financial support to pay these faculty assessors for their time and labor.

As I learned so many years ago, university stakeholders often hold very strong opinions about the place and importance of general education on their campus, and anecdotal evidence

¹ Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. *Resource Manual for the Principles of Accreditation*, 3rd Edition, 2018, p. 70.

² Western Carolina University, Liberal Studies Document 2.0, version approved on 5/1/2018, p. 2.

is not enough on its own to make a case for gen-ed's contribution to the larger curriculum. This reality underlies our renewed push toward an improved Liberal Studies assessment process. I hope the Liberal Studies Committee can count on your help in the coming months, as it works to implement these revised assessment goals and identify the ways in which Liberal Studies impacts the most important resource here at the university – our students.

Whee Were First: Advocating for our First-Generation College Students

**Elizabeth Marcus, Undergraduate Experience Librarian, Hunter Library
Dr. Russell Binkley, Associate Professor, School of Teaching and Learning
Members of WCU's First-Generation College Student Advisory Board**

On the morning of August 15, 2003, I hugged mom and dad goodbye and climbed into my jam-packed blue Ford Focus, nervous and excited about the day ahead. It was freshman move-in day at WCU, and, because they didn't realize this was a huge milestone of the college experience, my parents went on to work. As I drove up Chancellors Drive to Reynolds Residence Hall, I noticed U-Haul trucks and utility trailers lining the road. Questions flooded my mind as I wondered if I had brought enough necessities or forgotten something important. I started unloading boxes and a very tall man, later identified as Terry Nienhuis, helped carry my belongings up to the third floor. My roommate had already arrived, so I chatted briefly with her parents and started unpacking after they left. Although I had a built-in community as a member of the Honors College, the first few months at Western were lonely, because I was an introvert who had trouble conversing with strangers. As the oldest of my siblings and the first person in my family to go to college and pay for it, I felt the pressure to succeed and set the bar high for my younger sister and brother.

In contrast to Elizabeth's story above, I do not come off as serious and well-prepared when I think of my beginnings as a first-generation college student (FGCS) at least a generation earlier. I was the first in my family to go beyond the eighth grade and the first to attend college. I had no idea how to be a college student. I made abysmal grades in my first semesters at a junior college in Pennsylvania. My lower working-class origins had not prepared me for the middle-class discourse of the college classroom. I had no money, but my other deficits are substantial. I did not know how to furnish a dorm room (nor could I afford what that would have required). I lacked maturity and had no concept of delayed gratification or long-range planning. I didn't know I could approach faculty to ask for help. I never questioned a grade or asked for advice about my class schedule. I also lacked financial literacy, social skills, and self-discipline. I stayed up late having fun and then slept through my morning classes. I did not think critically. I never had any money beside the few dollars I could earn doing yardwork in the college neighborhood. If something came up that seemed important, I easily made the choice to skip class. The education I got in those years was costly even though it did not come from the classroom.

Who are our First-Generation College Students?

According to Mentoring and Persistence to Success (MAPS) Assistant Director, Janina DeHart, approximately 60% of WCU's incoming freshman class self-identified as FGCS in fall 2017. The University considers a student to be first-generation if neither parent has completed a four-year degree, even if at least one parent has acquired a two-year degree or some college credit. Students have the option to disclose their parents' educational history in the admissions process, but final data is collected during pre-registration. It is anticipated that the number of FGCS admitted to WCU may continue to rise due to the appeal of lower tuition costs through the new NC Promise plan, which could make WCU attractive for FGCS, as well as increased outreach and recruitment efforts in rural areas.

How is WCU supporting First-Generation College Students?

MAPS offers a number of resources, services, and programs to enhance the experience of FGCS at WCU. Currently, MAPS coordinates the Whee First Mentor Program that pairs interested first-generation students with faculty or staff volunteers most of whom were also FGCS. Mentors share knowledge about academics, campus services, and social opportunities. Mentors and mentees may participate in a variety of activities together such as attending sporting events, hiking campus trails, or taking a coffee break to catch up. In addition to the mentoring program, MAPS sponsors a First Gen Club that allows students to network, share experiences, and create engagement opportunities for the campus' first-generation population. The office also distributes a monthly e-newsletter to students and families and provides information about important dates, commonly used higher education terms, student spotlights, and resources through their website. They also offer drop-in academic coaching services. In addition to benefitting from MAPS resources, FGCS may participate in a number of other campus programs and services that prepare them for college life including Summer Learning Communities, University Experience (USI) classes, HOMEBASE Campus Ministry, and academic skills consultations and tutoring sessions through the Writing and Learning Commons (WaLC).

Advocating for First-Generation Students

It is likely that at least a few FGCS are enrolled in each class at WCU, and some classes may have as much as half. Therefore, faculty have many opportunities to provide support to this population. Here are just a few things that you can do:

- Recognize and reduce jargon and unfamiliar terms that you may use in communicating with students, especially in first-year classes.
- Remember that many FGCS work in order to pay for their education, so this is a factor to consider when building course schedules or requiring out-of-class commitments.
- Evaluate your class discourse and identify any underlying middle-class assumptions or leanings.
- Personally connect struggling students to appropriate campus services (MAPS, WaLC, Hunter Library, Office of Accessibility Services, or Counseling & Psychological Services), reminding them that these services are free. [Note: Students are identified in GradesFirst with a "1st Generation Student" indicator under the Categories section.]
- Volunteer as a Whee First Mentor.
- Tour and support HOMEBASE Campus Ministry, a program for students without family connections.
- Learn how you can become an advocate for FGCS at WCU by contacting MAPS at maps@wcu.edu or 828-227-7127.

Together, we can foster a successful college experience for first-generation college students, who can cross the stage at graduation and proudly say, "Whee were first!"