



# 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. Since I took over as editor of the Faculty Forum a few years ago I have generally strived to produce fewer issues a year with more content per issue. I figured that the primary barrier to getting readers was opening the attachment, therefore fewer clicks and more content per issue might yield more readers and more engagement. While I generally still agree with this philosophy, I am departing from this strategy in this issue.

In the lone article in this issue, Brian Railsback, Professor of English and Chair Emeritus of the Faculty Senate has written an engaging piece on the Chancellor's search process. Given the timeliness surrounding this conversation, I thought it best to offer Brian's commentary as soon as possible, so that Brian's thoughts could contribute to this ongoing dialogue. If you have additional thoughts on the matter, please email them to me and I will compile them into a future Faculty Forum.

As always, the opinions expressed here are those of the author only. 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. Likewise, I try to encourage thoughtful and considered opinions, regardless of my personal beliefs on the subject.

-Chris

## **The High Price of “Confidentiality” in Our State’s Mandated Chancellor Search Process**

**By Brian Railsback, Professor of English and Chair Emeritus of the WCU Faculty Senate**

While incredibly disappointing, the abrupt detour of WCU’s search for a new Chancellor is not surprising. The state’s mandated process for hiring Chancellors, one that keeps the finalists a secret, is absurd for a public university in a democracy. The process, excluding almost all stakeholders, creates a perfect setup for last-second derailment behind closed doors. Even worse, the secrecy makes it impossible to accurately assess the rationale for upending months of hard work by a diligent search committee with excellent leadership.

Last January, the Faculty Senate made an appeal to the search committee to open the process so that the university and community would have an opportunity to assess and meet the finalists when they came to campus. Later, it became clear that the state and the search firm would not allow the local committee to make this decision. The Faculty Senate statement to the committee is posted below.

The Board of Governors is now reviewing the search process. Unfortunately, there is a good chance the system will double down on a process that cuts almost all university and community stakeholders from access to finalists. Still, the Board of Governors has not voted on a new policy. Let’s hope that the Board will return the UNC system to an open process, one that served the system well for most of its existence and indeed works today in many states across the nation.

### **Faculty Senate Statement Concerning the Search for the Next WCU Chancellor**

*“We have long delivered transformative results for our state and its citizens, but we can do more to harness our institutions’ individual voices and strengths to speak and work together in pursuit of our shared goals.”*

*--UNC System President Margaret Spellings, January 24, 2018*

At its January meeting, the Faculty Senate voted (24 Ayes, 2 Nays, 1 Abstain) to send a message to Pat Kaemmerling, Chair, Chancellor Search Committee, strongly advocating for “open” forums for finalists selected for on-campus visits.

The Senate does not request an open process before finalists are selected.

The Senate understands the pressure on the committee to “close” all aspects of the search and the important reasons not to allow open forums for candidates selected for on-campus visits:

- The pool of candidates will be larger if strict confidentiality is maintained throughout the process
- Search firms, including the one hired for this search, strongly prefer—if not demand—a “closed” process
- The UNC Board of Governors and System HR prefer the “closed” process
- UNC Chancellor searches, including the one for David Belcher, have been “closed” for years (although at the time Dr. Belcher did participate in two other “open” searches).

However, there are compelling reasons to consider open forums for candidates selected for on-campus visits:

- WCU is a public institution, in a democracy, substantially underwritten by NC taxpayers
- The search process, including search firm fees, and the salary/benefits of the candidate selected, is underwritten by NC taxpayers
- The selection of a new Chancellor, who is by virtue of the position one of the most powerful public servants in western North Carolina, is a decision of great importance for every faculty member, staff member, and student at WCU; indeed, the decision will have much impact upon citizens across the region and state
- In a completely “closed” process, the majority of these stakeholders will not have access to the finalists and will therefore have no opportunity for input
- This lack of input does not enhance the introduction of a “surprise” Chancellor to those stakeholders left in the dark
- The “closed” nature of the process does not reflect recent, positive strides WCU has made toward transparency (consider the new budgeting process brought to WCU by David Belcher, for example)
- While applauded by search firms, the “closed” process sets an unfortunate precedent that will, and indeed has, trickled down to other positions (provosts and deans, for example)
- Secretive hiring practices for administrators will only widen the gap between campus managers and the constituents whom they endeavor to serve
- A “closed” process does not seem in accordance with what we like to call “the Western Way.”

The Faculty Senate has absolute confidence in the leadership and membership of the Search Committee for the next Chancellor of WCU. However, numerous emails to the Senate Chair, comments at the January Faculty Conversation, and the discussion and vote at the January Senate meeting all indicate that faculty—with some exceptions—strongly desire that all faculty, staff, and students have an opportunity to meet, question, and at least know the names/profiles of those candidates for Chancellor who are invited to campus for an interview.

Everyone in our community should have an opportunity for input in a decision that will affect all of us at Western Carolina University.