

What Does--or Could--Make Western Unique?

The FCTE Steering Committee has chosen the theme "What Makes WCU Unique?" as the focus for Center activities this year. "Unique," of course, may seem a large boast if we take it literally to mean one of a kind. Western is probably similar to many, if not most, of the 3,000 colleges and universities around the country. So the question of uniqueness is raised, not with the implication that we are already distinctly different from everyone else, but as an invitation--and a challenge--to think about our potential for developing a distinctive identity.

If you were a big name consultant brought in to size up WCU's circumstances and recommend a focal point for developing an institutional identity over the next decade, what would you emphasize? Do you suppose there is anything that a majority of WCU faculty and administrators might rally around as a point of pride? If you don't have an immediate answer to these questions, mull them over for awhile. Ask your colleagues for their thoughts along this line. Between now and next May, we'd like to air as many opinions as possible, not only through the *Faculty Forum*, but also in discussions involving students, faculty, and administrators.

To prime your critical thinking pump, here are a few points for your consideration:

1. For decades, WCU has emphasized its beautiful setting as a distinguishing asset. To what extent is it true that our setting makes us unique? If it does make us unique, how significant is this singular quality? Does our unusual and beautiful setting have a positive educational effect on our staff, faculty, and students? In the future, will this emphasis be necessary or sufficient for our sense of identity?
2. In the last few years, WCU has also advertised itself as a "community of scholarship." To what extent would this make us unique? Has it helped to define who we are? Has it changed the ways in which the university does its business? If the answer to any of these questions is "no," could this focus still be useful? How?
3. The Faculty Center has attempted to magnify pride in teaching excellence on campus. Does our practice justify our pride? Assuming that, collectively, we are pretty good if not outstanding teachers, can we claim a special niche in higher education for our commitment to teaching excellence? Are there ways in which some aspects of our commitment to teaching **is** unique?
4. Recent books such as *Profscam* and *Impostors in the Temple* present a

scathing criticism of university faculty. To what degree, if any, are we different from the self-centered, irresponsible academics described in these books? Can we shout "Not Guilty!" in a unified chorus?

5. The interactive feature of the **Faculty Forum** may be one thing that makes Western unusual if not unique among universities in the United States. Campus publications focused on teaching issues have proliferated in the last few years, but all I have seen are one-way communication; they go from the editor's desk to faculty mailboxes without any feedback loop. Like some of our professional journals, circulation may be large while readership is minuscule. But when you send in a response to a colleague's written opinion, whether you agree or disagree, you are participating in a rare and perhaps unique interchange. It is a public display of our willingness to share our opinions with one another, of our sincere commitment to teaching and the welfare of the university, of our determination to find a system of shared goals and values.
6. It is customary, of course, to assert that Western has a three-pronged commitment in teaching, research, and service. But such a claim certainly doesn't make Western unique--nearly everyone claims it. However, if we can convincingly demonstrate that we actually pull it off, we surely would have something to brag about! Is this an area that deserves more attention?

These and many other questions about how we define ourselves lead to the question of whether or not what we do is unique. If we can discern what makes us special, we can then ask how we solidify and perpetuate that uniqueness. Who are the key people who make this uniqueness possible? Are these people sufficiently aware of their role in maintaining our uniqueness or must they and/or other people be approached, engaged, or even more clearly rewarded for what they do?

This year, I would like to devote every issue of the **Faculty Forum** to the question of WCU's uniqueness. Over the summer I interviewed some of our administrators on this question, and I am anticipating some insightful, provocative opinion pieces from them. But we need to hear from a good cross-section of faculty. Hopefully, the campus community will discover aspects of WCU that can help us forge a stronger sense of identity and purpose for the years ahead. As we discover what is unique about Western, we may also discover that much of what we do is not unique but is still worth doing well and worth adding to the list of characteristics that most clearly define us. As we focus on the next century in Cullowhee, we certainly want to be as good as we can be.

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If you would like to respond to this opinion piece, please send your comments either to Terry in English or at the FCTE. Please indicate whether you are willing to be quoted or prefer to remain anonymous.