



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

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DO MORE TO ESCAPE STRESS – AND KILL YOUR TV WHILE YOU'RE AT IT

As one scans the institutional documents related to the university's strategic plan, the Stewards of Place model, and UNC Tomorrow initiative; phrases like "regional economic transformation," "livable communities," and "cultural enrichment" come to the fore. (Call me a nerd – I actually enjoy reading this stuff.) As WCU applies the Stewards of Place model to effect regional economic transformation, one core focus becomes promoting the arts and cultural enrichment to enhance the livability of the community. This focus on art and culture is important on many levels and expands beyond an institutional checklist of tasks relegated to a particular administrative division. Yes, integration of WCU's academic programming with the regional arts and crafts scene does contribute to the livability of the community. But, increasing individual participation in those cultural events is also crucial to the well-being of the community, the region, and society as a whole. In this matter of cultural participation, we all have a stake.

Art and culture are important components of a vibrant, healthy community. They add meaning to the lives of the people who live there. As you might guess, the arts contribute to the education and development of individuals, inspire creativity, and promote the understanding of other cultures resulting in an enriched understanding of the world. Interestingly, though, cultural participation seems to affect citizens on another societal level. Several national studies reveal overwhelming correlations between arts participation and positive individual and civic behaviors. One recent report from the National Endowment for the Arts concludes, "Americans who read books, visit museums, attend theater, and engage in other arts are more active, more involved, and more socially engaged than those who do not participate in cultural activities." Cultural participants volunteer more, exercise more, engage in more outdoor activities, and support local sports more than those who do not participate. Citizens living in a culturally active community appear to be not only more engaged but also happier, healthier, less stressed, and more productive.

For these reasons, a vibrant, active, local cultural scene attracts corporations looking to relocate to the community. This fact is important to us as WCU reaches out to draw private partners to participate in the development of a town center and millennial campus. Development in these areas can have a positive effect, not only on the regional economy but also on the quality of life that we all enjoy. Increasing participation in cultural events on campus is one indication that this community can support a profitable, thriving town center. How are we doing on this front?

Western North Carolina does have a rich tradition in art, music, crafts, and other cultural pursuits. The university continues to enhance this region's thriving arts community through expanded programming and increasing participation in cultural events. Currently, more than 10% of all WCU students and roughly seven percent of all faculty and staff are involved in some way with the production of arts and entertainment events for the region. The number of community-sponsored events hosted last year by just the Fine & Performing Arts Center alone doubled over the previous year. More people saw more community plays, concerts, public school performances, and regional dance recitals on campus. The total number of events held at the Fine & Performing Arts Center last year increased by nearly half over the previous year, and overall attendance at events continues to increase. These figures do indicate increasing participation in cultural events on campus.

The many faculty members who contribute to this increase in cultural participation deserve warm commendation. We see their faces at gallery receptions, theatre performances, concerts, film series, cultural

presentations, and yes even sporting events. Their reasons for attending may be entertainment or education-related. A strong cultural tradition may run through their veins. Perhaps they participate to support their students and colleagues. Regardless of their personal reasons, they form the core of the university cultural scene. They understand how a cultural event can enrich the lives of those who share that experience. Every event that they attend transforms them in some positive manner. Each cultural experience changes their perspective in some way as they participate, observe, and reflectively contemplate on that experience. This transformation becomes evident in their personal lives, their classrooms, and their community.

Perhaps many others would like to have such transforming experiences as these, but have not been able to participate in campus events. Reasons for not attending cultural events on campus are just as numerous and varied as those for attending them. Leisure time seems to be at a premium and fragmented. Economic uncertainty affects how we spend our discretionary dollars. A proliferation of other entertainment media substitutes for the live experience. Information about the many events on campus may be overwhelmingly abundant for some faculty and elusive for others. And the list goes on. How can we remove these barriers to cultural participation on campus so that more of us can participate? The latter two roadblocks to attending cultural events are probably the easiest to overcome, so we'll tackle those first.

Quite simply, you can find all the information you need about cultural events on campus in one easy place online. Just go to the WCU Arts & Entertainment Web page at <http://events.wcu.edu>. Here you'll find a listing of upcoming main events with links to news articles and tickets, gallery listings and movie marquees, and a link to the comprehensive calendar of A&E-related events on campus. Need help sorting through all the info to find just the types of events that interest you? Scan *Event Preview*, the weekly e-newsletter listing of upcoming events. The week's events are arranged by type and also contain helpful links to more information about each particular event. If you are not already receiving *Event Preview* in your inbox at the beginning of every week, subscribe online at the WCU Arts & Entertainment Web page. Just enter your name and email address in the short form and hit subscribe. It's that easy. So whether you get event info online or drive it to your inbox each week, you have the tools you need to be able to plan your on-campus, cultural activities. Now, how do we deal with the issue of those scarce resources – time and money?

Americans who work generally earn more money than ever before, but our leisure time is meted out intermittently. We tend to gravitate toward entertainment options that are convenient and flexible and that require little commitment from us up front. Instead of planning a cultural activity, many of us end up turning on the TV, popping in a DVD or BlueRay, or gathering 'round the Xbox. It's easier. But in the same amount of time that we spend flipping channels or making it through the next few levels, we could engage in something fresh, provocative, and involving – a cultural event on campus perhaps. Logistically, campus events are designed around your convenience. You can peruse the event listings and buy your tickets online, drive directly to the venue, park usually within a city block from the door, and enjoy a total cultural experience within a two-hour time-span. You can't beat the convenience of an event on the WCU campus.

You also can't beat the entertainment value of a campus event. Tickets to national touring acts and major theatre productions on campus usually go for \$20 or less. You can experience world-class musicians, visual artists, and local ensembles oftentimes for free. Art galleries, museum exhibits, and receptions are made available on a donation basis. Compare the costs of these events with those in other cultural centers in our region. Add to that the free parking and no-hassle logistics and you can't afford not to attend.

Immersion in cultural activities goes well beyond pure entertainment value. Participation does allow us to escape stress and rejuvenate, transforming ourselves and our communities while creating memories with our family and friends. If you've never experienced a cultural event on campus, resolve to attend at least one next semester. If you are an ardent supporter of the arts, introduce your passion to at least one other person - a friend, relative, colleague, student or a neighbor who may have no ties to the university already. These may become the folks who will sit on regional symphony boards, volunteer at local museums, or pave the way for the non-university community to become regular attendees. Next time you find a free block of time on your schedule, grab a friend and attend a cultural event on campus. You're probably bored with TV anyway, so use that remote clicker to kill it. Grab your jacket and someone else and come on down.

John West, Associate Dean, College of Fine and Performing Arts
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Responses to *Digital Schmigital: Mobile Schmobile!*, the feature article in the November 2008 issue of Faculty Forum written by John LeBaron and Neil Torda.

Bob Houghton, Associate Professor in Education Oct 31, 2008 10:45 PM

John and Neil, thanks for stepping up on this thinking. Your leadership has been huge. There is still much to be done.

Unresolved is what WCU defines as digitally literate for 21st century careers and personal development. What are the most basic requirements that all need? Curiously, higher education could be seen as largely silent on the issue at the national and state levels. Though higher education had the technology and mission long before public schools, it has been the K-12 educational community that has defined standards for K-12 settings (Google this -NETS standards for Teachers and Students). But they've only started the job, not finished it. Where is higher education's leadership on this? Where is Educause in correlating with NETS standards, an organization which claims to be the premier "nonprofit association whose mission is to advance higher education by promoting the intelligent use of information technology". Where is WCU's? How do we take the handoff from K-12 in North Carolina and the NETS standards and build on it in the Liberal Studies program, leading to greater digital specialization in majors? What feedback are we annually giving state high schools about the preparedness of those sent to us? What must every college freshman and sophomore be able to do? The state of NC has given us an 8th grade exam as one definition. What is WCU's? What promises can WCU recruiters make to potential students about the digital literacy capacities they will graduate with? What standards can employers expect from WCU? How are the software licenses that IT buys integrated into our definition? As one example of our progress, I'm having to teach seniors spreadsheet skills that 8th graders are taught, software that has been standard since the 1980's, which the seniors generally report they have not used since 8th grade, if then.

The English department makes gigantic Freshman strides with text literacy with Eng 101 & 102 but we are a wee bit past the date that Gutenberg came up with his printing press. Shouldn't curriculum come from what the working world is doing and using? Where will students pick up the rest of the 21st century's reading and composing agenda, knowledge routinely used to think about and structure information on the Net with: image, audio, video, 2D & 3D animation, and sensors & robotics compositions. We have the capacity to teach live over the Internet or any hybrid variation to any distance. These capacities remain barely explored by specialty courses let alone taught to some degree to all.

This knowledge should not be optional. The still growing presence of personal computers and the NET have established a new set of global literacy standards that are still expanding. WCU has wealth of under utilized technology resources begging application to new century thinking for employers looking to leadership from our graduates.

For a more detailed consideration of these ideas, see:
<http://ceap.wcu.edu/houghton/MM/literacyMM.html>