



# Faculty Forum

*From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence*

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

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## Research and Teaching

There seems to be an anti-research attitude among some faculty members, particularly those who contribute to the **Forum**. The thesis has been advanced that research (interpreted broadly as scholarship, publication, and creative endeavors not immediately linked to classroom teaching) does not contribute and may detract from the teaching mission of the university. That is, the critics seem to be saying that faculty members engaged in research should instead be putting that effort into teaching, which the critics believe is the near-exclusive role of a university like Western Carolina.

I would like to offer an opposing viewpoint. My frame of reference is the natural sciences, but the argument should have general application. First, let us admit that learning involves both the advancement of knowledge and its transmission to succeeding generations. The university is our society's principal institution for higher learning. According to criteria established by the State of North Carolina, Western Carolina is in fact a university. Thus it follows that research and scholarship are appropriate functions of our institution. It should not be necessary to keep saying these things, but apparently it is.

Does research enhance teaching? In general, I think it does. Research is a strong incentive for keeping abreast of current thinking and the current literature in one's field of study, and for maintaining enthusiasm for the discipline. Those opposed to research argue that most research areas are so narrow that there is little that carries over into the classroom, particularly in introductory courses. For example, if Professor X's specialty is the classification of fungus beetles, how often does she or he have the opportunity to utilize that knowledge in the classroom? This sort of reasoning is deceptive. Faculty members engaged in research, who read the current literature in their own specialty, are drawn to related disciplines and to the more general literature. I expect that Professor X would read not only the Coleopterists' Bulletin, but also Systematic Zoology and Evolution, and Science and Nature as well. Such efforts would be expected to inform and enhance the professor's performance in the classroom as well as at the laboratory bench.

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In the sciences it is difficult over the long run for faculty members who are not doing research to maintain a level of competency needed for university teaching in the sciences. The stimulation and encouragement provided by the larger professional discipline are absent. The motivation to "keep up" is lacking. Of course, there are exceptional individuals at Western Carolina, and it is not my intent to malign their accomplishments in teaching. In most cases, however, no matter what the pedagogic skills or classroom charisma, one simply cannot be a complete science teacher at the university level without familiarity with current developments, and without continued practice in doing real science. At WCU several faculty members involved in research encourage participation by undergraduate students.

The reasoning presented above should apply to fields other than the sciences, though I realize that "research" is not always the right word. The idea is simply that a faculty member should pursue scholarly interests appropriate to the discipline, which, though separate from his/her formal teaching responsibilities, will serve in the long run to better the individual's performance as a teacher.

In our graduate programs, some of the graduate degrees require a thesis based on original research and scholarship. Directing the thesis research of graduate students is a form of teaching and requires continuing research experience on the part of the thesis supervisor. This is a serious problem in some departments where there is a division between non-researchers and researchers. The result is that some important areas of the discipline are not represented in the graduate program.

How can the teaching-research problem be resolved? It may be helpful to consider the advice given some years ago by the great Yale scholar, G. Evelyn Hutchinson. In commenting on the antithesis between teaching and research, Hutchinson suggested that the University be "regarded primarily as a place of learning, and not as a place of teaching." He went on to propose that "there is no antithesis between learning and research, because if the teacher is not learning himself, he can never teach by example." This, to me, is the essence of the argument.

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Hutchinson, G. E. 1943. A note on the function of a university. Reprinted in Hutchinson, G. E. 1970, *The itinerant ivory tower: scientific and literary essays*. Books for Libraries Press.