



# Faculty Forum

*From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence*

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

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## Toward a Kinder, Gentler Campus ?

Examples of the "us vs. them" mentality can be found easily enough on any university campus: faculty vs. administration, teaching vs. research, education vs. training, academics vs. athletics, cosmopolitans vs. locals. Such tensions will always be with us to some degree. Nevertheless, after nearly a quarter of a century at WCU, I have grown weary of them.

The finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom on fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling. Yet we do not treat ourselves nor one another thus tenderly. Thoreau, *Walden*

Too often we seem to enjoy reveling in our differences rather than trying to transcend them. Wouldn't it really be more satisfying to be seeking a climate of greater mutual respect and support? I would like to see a kinder, gentler campus, and having recently perused a copy of *Walden*, I have a slogan to accompany this worthy objective: *Simplify! Simplify! Thoreau It Away!*

Our life is like a German Confederacy made up of petty states, with its boundary forever fluctuating. . . . The nation . . . is just such an unwieldy and overgrown establishment.

Thoreau's view of the nation in his time seems equally appropriate for our universities today. Too often we are our own worst enemies, clinging to mindless traditions and making things more complicated than they need be. But there are many steps we could take to simplify our circumstances. Here are some suggestions.

### 1. Thoreau away faculty ranks!

Traditions die hard, but the idea of faculty ranks is surely one whose time has *gone*. Just consider the amount of time invested in the promotion process each year. Campus-wide, if measured from preparation of individual files to final decisions in Chapel Hill, it runs into the hundreds if not thousands of hours. Surely the individual candidates, departmental faculty and heads, school committee members and deans, higher administrators, as well as Boards of Trustees and Governors, could devote their time to more productive matters.

Most men, . . . through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them.

Even without the traditional ranks, faculty are still subject to at least two other ranking systems: tenure/nontenure and salary. These are sufficient because every factor relevant to a promotion decision should also be considered in the tenure process or in an annual review (= salary). Perhaps even more important than the time saved, eliminating professorial ranks would eliminate a major source of disappointment, bitterness, frustration, jealousy, and ill will.

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## **2. Thoreau away open-ended administrative appointments!**

This might be a problem at the upper levels, but the idea of fixed terms for heads and deans (four and six years, respectively) has much to commend it. Even those with higher level appointments should periodically have a "year of renewal" devoted exclusively to full-time teaching or research.

Such a system, where all academic administrative appointments eventually lead back to a classroom or research setting, would contribute greatly to the concept of a "community of scholarship." In particular, those responsible for evaluating teaching and research could demonstrate their own abilities in these areas, thus enhancing their credibility by serving as role models. Moreover, they would become better informed and hopefully more sensitive to the problems full-time faculty face every day. Our sense of community could only grow stronger.

A continuing record of exemplary teaching and scholarship should be the personal desire and goal of anyone who aspires to any position that requires evaluation of faculty. Anything less is merely capitulation to a system of deandoms and other petty states, as well as big buck "perqatories" for those whose first love is neither teaching nor research!

## **3. Thoreau away *Faculty Forum!***

Really! Replace it with a live forum that receives the highest priority in campus life. At the designated time each month let all other university activities cease so that everyone in the university community can trek over to Ramsey (or wherever). Besides establishing a live campus dialogue, there would surely be less shadow-boxing than with the current essays and responses. The live forum would be more spontaneous and almost certainly involve more people. After all, it takes less time to talk than to write well (or think). Just ask any mathematician!

## **4. Thoreau away . . .**

Limited space precludes details of some of my other ideas, such as staffing the Admissions Office primarily with faculty, establishing direct dialogue between faculty and members of the Board of Trustees, and eliminating the most mindless tradition of all -- GPA's. However, two additional thoughts from Thoreau beg for attention:

**There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. . . .  
To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, . . .but to so  
love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity,  
independence, magnanimity, and trust.**

Simplicity, magnanimity, trust -- three interrelated keys to a kinder, gentler campus. A concerted effort by each of us for more of all three would enrich us beyond our fondest dreams.

**It is never too late to give up our prejudices. No way of thinking or  
doing, however ancient, can be trusted without proof. What everybody  
echoes or in silence passes by as true today may turn out to be  
falsehood tomorrow, mere smoke of opinion. . . .**

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**Editor's Note.** Has our resident Thoreauvian made any worthwhile suggestions, or should we Thoreau him into a pond? What about WCU would you like to Thoreau away? Please respond now to *Faculty Forum*, FCTE, 161 Hunter Library.