



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 4, No. 7

April 1, 1992

Standards, Grades, Past Experiences, and Expectations

The dialogue about academic standards at WCU makes me nervous. I am as willing as anyone to "examine the unexamined" or even to pursue curiosity, but I wonder if the dialogue is a genuine exercise in dispassionate inquiry. After all, one can hardly speak against high standards. If we are having this conversation because we do not know what we mean by standards and we are slightly nervous about our ignorance, then I applaud our efforts, but if the dialogue is a way to make instructors feel self-conscious about their grading or to bring about the lowering or raising of the general G.P.A. of the university, then I think we ought to be talking about other issues.

The theme of standards emerged this year in Jim Wallace's anecdote at the opening faculty meeting on August 21, 1991. Jim told us that last May, NC State recognized seven students with 4.0 averages out of 2,500 graduates while WCU recognized twelve students with 4.0 averages out of 600. Jim said, "projecting Western Carolina's twelve up to 2,500 students means, on the same basis, we would have had approximately fifty 4.0 students to their seven. . . . I don't know what that means, but I think it should be discussed" (*The Reporter*, August 30, 1991). There are at least two possible and somewhat obvious implications behind Jim's example: (1) our academic standards are somehow inadequate; or (2) WCU has a greater number of genuinely outstanding students than NC State. We are led, of course, to conclude that the first assumption is the valid one, but both of these interpretations assume that there is, in fact, some valid relationship between academic standards and grades. I want to suggest that we question this assumption.

If grades and standards are seen as connected, then I fear that our dialogue about improving academic standards at WCU will simply be reduced to finding ways to adjust grades, to make it possible for students to gain either higher or lower grade point averages. This notion of standards is all too close to the iniquitous "curve" in which a predetermined number of students will be grouped at the top, middle, and bottom of any set of scores. This kind of thinking seems to me to foster unhealthy competition, the notion of winners and losers in a zero-sum game, and an emphasis on quantity over quality. Moreover, the kinds of intelligence, imagination, and compassion that I value in educated people cannot be measured in grade point averages. I do not want to participate in a dialogue about standards that results in more emphasis on grades, ranking, and hierarchy. I believe these things to be irrelevant at best and iniquitous at worst.

Somehow, our discussion of standards needs to go beyond this assumption about the connection of standards and grades to include such issues as the expectations students bring with them to college, as well as the ones the faculty have for them when they arrive. The students who enter the university for the first time are not blank slates. They arrive filled with past school experiences that create in them expectations about themselves, their learning, their teachers, and what we might call academic standards. This was brought home rather poignantly to me last August in my English 101 section. I asked students to fill out a brief questionnaire. In response to the question, "how can I help you to feel welcome in this class and comfortable at college?," nine

STEERING COMMITTEE: FACULTY CENTER FOR TEACHING EXCELLENCE

Steve Eberly	(7264)	Rita Noel	(7401)	Duncan Tye	(7401)
Casey Hurley	(7415)	Jane Perlmutter	(7108)	Jim Wallace	(7244)
Bill Hyatt	(7272)	Anne Rogers	(7120)	Al Wiggins	(7491)
Glenn Liming	(7260)	Carol Stephens	(7113)		

CENTER STAFF

Ben Ward, Director	(7196)
Ellen Bacon, Fellow	(7196)
Terry Nienhuis, Fellow	(7196)
Kathleen Wright, Fellow	(7196)

of the nineteen responses seemed to suggest that past school experiences had not been positive. The six most poignant were these:

Please don't make me feel like an idiot if I make a mistake.

Be open minded and give my ideas a chance. I also hate to be looked down on for not knowing something.

Please help me or send me somewhere where I can get good help if I need it since I know you'll be very busy teaching English classes.

Please do not embarrass me too much.

You can make me feel welcome by not embarrassing me.

I hate rejection and would like it if you made it easy to express myself without making me look stupid.

I have no reason to suppose that my section of first-year students was any different from others. Does this mean that one third to one half of the students entering college each fall expect that they will be looked down on, rejected, made fun of, or embarrassed? No doubt some of these attitudes are attributable to things other than previous schooling, but I suspect many classroom experiences have also contributed to the fears and anxieties about what to expect in college and not the least of which is our obsession with evaluation.

If our response to the issue of academic standards is to re-emphasize the importance of grades rather than the importance of learning, what will the effect be on student attitudes like the ones expressed above? I am not sure what these data suggest, but I think this kind of perspective about students and their expectations needs to be part of our dialogue about academic standards. We must expand the concept to include more than grades.

Dan Fredricks, NCCAT and English

••••• **•Editor's Call for Responses•** •••••

If you would like to respond to Dan's opinion piece, please send your comments, by the 8th of the month, either to Dan at 202 NCCAT (or the English Department) or to Terry Nienhuis at the FCTE, 161 Hunter Library. Please indicate whether you are willing to be quoted or prefer to remain anonymous.