



Faculty Forum

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Could Newsgroups Help?

"WCU newsgroups are a classic example of how NOT to build faculty-student community. Instead of allowing students and faculty access to all existing newsgroups, someone decided to drastically censor newsgroup access. That decision left a handful of irrelevant, boring, little-read wastes of bandwidth. Our faculty and students must interact within a 'real world' environment, not a sanitized, 'best of all possible worlds' illusion that inhibits meaningful communication."--John Moore

John Moore's response in the February 15 issue of notes & quotes asserts that local newsgroups are not a good way to build a stronger sense of community between faculty and students at Western. I believe that he is wrong, but maybe we should start by making sure everyone understands what newsgroups are.

Newsgroups are an Internet phenomenon that enables people with computers to communicate with one another on particular subjects. For example, if you are interested in Shakespeare's sonnets or the recreational use of guns, somewhere on the Internet there is an international discussion going on right now, and tonight you can join it. You can log on, see what other people are concerned about, see what opinions and queries have been posted, see how others have answered, post an answer yourself, or pose your own opinions or questions. People also publish essays, even manifestos, in newsgroups, and everyone is invited to join in the discussion. Some newsgroups are "moderated," where the articles are first sent to an editor for approval before appearing in the newsgroup. Other newsgroups are unmonitored and, as one might expect, contain more to wade through in order to get to the pearls of wisdom.

National and international newsgroups multiply daily and Western faculty and students have access to much of it through the WCU Internet. About 9,000 newsgroups now exist throughout the world, and one can have access from WCU, at the time of this writing, to 7,168, or about 80%, of those newsgroups. More are added daily. This hardly sounds like censoring of newsgroup access. Using any Netscape 3 version, simply pull down from the top menu "Netscape News," go to File and pull down "Add Newsgroup," and you will be invited to type in the name of a newsgroup you can join. To find the names of newsgroups, you can search www.dejanews.com and find more newsgroup names than you can handle. For Netscape 4 versions, the procedure is quite different, but you can use the Help page or contact me for instructions.

We have approximately 4.5 gigabytes of disk space for use by our campus users--not quite enough to carry absolutely everything. But of that space, about 1/2 to 3/4 is usually full--sometimes more and sometimes less. By reducing the expire time (the time before posted messages are removed to free space) to 1-2 days, we could perhaps carry more groups; however, that would give our community only those 1-2 days to read new messages. Currently, messages are expired after 4-5 days (and sometimes this number is increased, based on traffic). The local newsgroups are expired after 180 days.

To access local newsgroups, one uses Netscape to get to the WCU home page (www.wcu.edu). Then one clicks on Centers, goes to Computer Center, clicks on Resources, and one finally sees a list of WCU Newsgroups. These are the newsgroups that John considers irrelevant to faculty-student interaction. One newsgroup (wcu.rec.weekends) discusses what to do around here for entertainment on weekends. Another provides a clearing house for humor. Another talks about career opportunities. Another provides help with the Internet or with general computer problems. The Task Force on University Governance has a discussion group, as does the General Education Review Committee. There's also a newsgroup for departmental or interdepartmental discussions, newsgroups set up for particular courses, and there's even a newsgroup (wcu.config) to discuss what should be added to the list of WCU newsgroups. Obviously, the opportunities for meaningful newsgroup experiences exist at WCU.

The question of whether or not these opportunities are used is something else. The computer and the Internet are simply tools. If people choose not to use them, it's like people not realizing that there's a county fair in the town around the bend or like recalcitrant farmers insisting on the old mule and a plow rather than using a John Deere to make the soil fit for crops. Imagine an interest in local newsgroups that would create and sustain a newsgroup for students who were dissatisfied with WCU and were looking to transfer. Faculty and other students could perhaps intervene, solve problems, and help stem the tide of poor retention that threatens WCU's fiscal and academic health.

I have tried for over two years to get the campus community involved in local newsgroups but seem to have failed, considering the precious small traffic I see in the WCU groups. I've no idea how many, if any, of our campus community use the other non-WCU groups. However, I'd certainly love to share with anyone who is interested how much I've learned in my own field by reading and participating in newsgroups--even in the days before we had our own server. They've even been useful to me on a personal level. Considering the sheer volume of what we do carry, I feel certain each person on our campus (students, staff and faculty) can find several groups that are useful both professionally and personally. And, with Netscape's new technology, finding groups to each person's liking has become a very simple task.

If the interchange of ideas among a reasonably well-mixed cross-section of the world's population is a good thing in general, then newsgroups are one way to get involved. Spend 30-60 minutes one day looking through some of the newsgroups our campus carries (both wcu and worldwide groups). After looking around, think about how they might be useful in class or elsewhere in your life. Not everyone will find the newsgroups useful, but everyone should have access to them in order to decide. I'd also suggest attending the Computer Implementation Workshops given by the Faculty Center; Chris Martin, Laura Chapman, Bob Orr, and Beth Leftwich are including a brief segment on the use of newsgroups in "Netscape, the Web, and E-Mail."

I want to be sure that Mr. Moore's editorial doesn't cause the ship to sink entirely, as I remember being a student and would have loved to have such an avenue to learn, meet people, and discuss ideas outside of class. Please don't take Mr. Moore's comments on newsgroups as absolute. See for yourself and (gulp) call me if you have difficulty in finding newsgroups (or look at <http://www.wcu.edu/cc/infosheets/news.html> for basic help). Notice that I'm the primary poster to wcu.announce, although I wish I weren't. See for yourself. At WCU, newsgroups are alive!

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