

On Change and Deep Culture at WCU

Some say that the only thing unique about Western Carolina University is that it is the sole university in the country in a non-incorporated area. I reject that notion. There is no question that we are unique in the true meaning of the word: there is only one Western Carolina University. Our uniqueness is rooted not in any single trait but in a combination of elements such as

- our size
- our tradition of caring for students
- our valuing of excellent teaching
- our international outreach and service programs
- our mix of majors
- our particular combination of general education courses
- our geographic location
- our civility in handling disagreements
- our tradition of service to the region
- the beauty of our campus grounds
- our tradition of faculty productivity
- our desire to build a true community of scholarship

Like a multi-faceted kaleidoscope, these various elements are indispensable to the unique design which is Western Carolina University at this time in history. There are surely other elements comprising our uniqueness, and a valuable part of our proposed dialogue this year involves modifying a list like this to arrive at a more generally held and agreed upon description of what makes WCU unique. Most if not all of the elements listed above no doubt exist on other campuses, but nowhere do these elements take quite the exact form that they take at Western. However, the elements of our kaleidoscope are about to change substantially, and the resulting pattern will necessarily shift.

We are on the brink of a radical period of change at Western Carolina University, and the extent and nature of the change will be greater than any WCU has experienced since the late sixties and early seventies.

Fact: Within 3-5 years, nearly 33% of our tenured faculty will be eligible to retire.

Fact: Within that same period, we are likely to employ a new Chancellor and at least one new Vice-Chancellor.

Fact: We are currently searching for two new Deans.

Fact: A new organizational entity, the School of Applied Science, has come into existence, replacing two schools, each of which had a fairly long history.

Fact: Western Carolina University will be establishing its first doctoral level program during this time, thus entering a new level of instructional responsibility.

Fact: For the past three years, we have been asked to do more with less (e.g., we have increased our enrollment by 3% in each of the last three years while resources have been restricted). This trend is expected to continue for the foreseeable future.

While all organizations change, most do so slowly and in such a way that they maintain their core identity while integrating changing personnel and programs. However, some organizations experience such massive changes over such a short period that they are hard pressed to accommodate them and are in danger of losing their core identity, their "deep culture." This is especially true of organizations that have not become aware of the factors in their culture that create their uniqueness. E.H. Schein in Organizational Culture and Leadership (1985) has suggested that this "deep culture" operates unconsciously and consists of the *basic assumptions and beliefs* shared by members of an organization. These assumptions are often taken for granted as an organization formulates its view of itself and its environment.

Deep culture operates very much like an individual's unconscious awareness of identity. Though not evident in everyday functioning, the individual's basic assumptions and beliefs, like the organization's basic assumptions and beliefs, greatly influence behavior. Schein points out that organizations pass through stages much like people in their development to maturity. An organization that has matured is one which "knows who it is, what its role in the world is, how to accomplish its mission, and how to conduct its affairs" (p. 206). In the process of reaching maturity, successful members of an organization must become aware of at least some of the elements of the deep culture, just as individuals must understand themselves as deeply as possible in order to function most fully. Finally, Schein also points out that this often unconsciously held deep culture is taught to new members of an organization as the way to respond to any new organizational problems (p. 9). Therefore, if in the next three to five years we will be welcoming a third of the faculty who will be teaching at WCU in the year 2000 as well as new administrative leaders, it is important for us to become more conscious of the basic assumptions that we will be passing on to the generation of academics who will replace many of us who have served this university for the past twenty years or more.

As we embrace the process of becoming more conscious of our uniqueness, what are some of the questions we need to address?

- What are other elements of WCU's "deep culture," what impact do they have on what we do now, and which should we try to keep and pass on to the future?
- How does our geographical location and size affect us?
- How can we solidify and amplify our tradition of caring for students?
- How can we emphasize and perpetuate our valuing of excellent teaching?
- How can we give more support and encouragement for the productivity of our faculty?
- How can we improve our civility in handling disagreements?
- What do we need to do to ensure the quality of our general education courses and mix of majors?
- How can we solidify and amplify our tradition of service to the region?
- How can we improve our international outreach and service programs?

- At what cost should we preserve the beauty of our campus grounds?
- How can we continue to build a true community of scholarship?

We still have most of this academic year to consider such questions and even to consider whether my description begins to capture our uniqueness. Please add your voice to the dialogue through the **Forum**, the activities promoted by the FCTE, and the normal activities within your school, department, and individual contacts with colleagues and students. Questions like these are too important to be left to unconscious processes.

Judy Stillion, Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs

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

If you would like to respond to this opinion piece, please send your comments **by the 8th of the month** either to Judy at 557 HFR or to Terry at the FCTE. Please indicate whether you are willing to be quoted or prefer to remain anonymous.