



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

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Are We Throwing Away Too Much Talent? And If So, Why?

In the past year or so, we have heard more and more about the "brain drain" from UNC, UNC-Charlotte, and N.C. State because those institutions, under the constraints of the state budget, cannot pay the salaries high-quality faculty can command elsewhere.

Is this a problem at Western? Maybe, especially since our salaries tend to be lower than salaries at those UNC schools. But what I have seen in my fourteen years of faculty watching is that we often throw away high-quality faculty who want to stay. Why? Sometimes it's because they are too creative, too individualistic (don't fit in, don't play our games), or too good at doing something a little different. Maybe we don't know how to judge their quality because they are the only ones who know their particular fields.

Sometimes we just don't fight to get them a real position on their own merits. Although the decisions must be made on a case-by-case basis at the department level, a certain philosophy crosses departmental and school lines. I could cite cases of several men, but here are four women from four departments whose situations we have mishandled:

- * One had taught here on a year-to-year basis for years when her position was finally made tenure track and advertised nationwide; she applied and got the job here, but only after she got an interview at Appalachian State. Why did she have to threaten to leave before we found her a position? Now she's ours and she's widely recognized for her expertise in her field. We're glad, but success stories like hers are all too rare.
- * Another woman of obvious quality, inspiring to students and bringing grant money into the university as well, was teaching on a part-time, year-to-year basis and was told to go get another offer if she wanted a more equitable situation here. She wanted to buy a house and settle down here instead. Now she's not on our faculty.
- * Another highly creative woman with a national reputation in her field was forced out of a tenure-track position (our program in her field was eliminated) because of rumor, innuendo, resentment, and ill-feeling. People in her department didn't know how to handle a person who was "different." Now she's somewhere else, and we don't educate professionals in that specialty.
- * Still another--a woman publishing in nationally esteemed periodicals--was told to apply for other jobs so that we could argue to make her three-year position tenure-track. She got an offer from Penn State with a lighter teaching load, teaching in her specialty only, a higher salary, and sabbaticals. We couldn't begin to compete with that. Now she's tenured at Penn State (and has taken her first sabbatical).

I call this shooting ourselves in the foot.

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Not only does job hunting and interviewing at other schools drain faculty energy and undercut morale, but we stand in danger of losing someone who would "rather be in Cullowhee" and has much to offer us. If we push out creative or different faculty members--maybe just because they speak their own minds--how do we maintain the vitality and energy of our scholastic life?

What is it in our university culture (the deep-down, underlying assumptions about ourselves that influence what we do) that makes us want people more when someone else wants them, too? Isn't it like the toddler who shows no interest in a toy unless another toddler picks it up? Sure, an interview or offer from another school helps confirm our judgment in hiring the person in the first place, but why do we need that external confirmation? Don't we have the same paper evidence another university would have, plus our experience with the faculty member at Western? Can't we trust our own judgement?

In its research, documented in 1988, Western's Task Force on Teaching Effectiveness found that university culture is one of the hardest things to change. The climate for creative teaching at Western changed as a result of the Task Force's work, but in how many ways does this culture still hold us back?

In the world outside the university, of course, vital cultures are constantly adjusting and incorporating change in response to new ideas and changing conditions. Those who speak out or who rock the boat often bring the innovations that help us survive. At Western, we call ourselves a university community based on scholarship--the discovery and propagation of new knowledge--and we advertise our acceptance of a diverse student population. Can we embrace a more diverse faculty population as well? Can we appreciate, without crippling resentment or ridicule, those who are gifted differently from ourselves? Can we realize that we, and they, give Western itself much to offer and make it a valuable place for valuable people to work--a place, in fact, that valuable people may prefer to work?

To stop shooting ourselves in the foot, maybe we need more explicit standards for personnel and TPR decisions or more accountability from those who make them.

What we more crucially need, however, is a change in our own deep-down, underlying assumptions about ourselves, individually and collectively. We need to be clear enough about our own worth that a different worth is not a threat but an opportunity. We need to be generous enough to acknowledge the value of that different worth and not to hold a grudge against a difference of opinion or a difference of skill.

Maybe I'm asking for a change in human nature. In any case, I know I'm asking for a shift of consciousness not easy to make. But as long as too many of us assume that the best people need to go elsewhere--to save us from questioning ourselves, or to protect our egos, or even to get what they (we) deserve--Western will never be the best that it can be. Surely we can celebrate, as a scholarly community, the diversity within our common endeavor, changing to improve our chances for growth. Our future depends on it.

Anonymous

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

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