

WCU: Size and Vitality in a Unique Combination

As the Dean of the Graduate School, I spend quite a lot of time recruiting graduate students, and I frequently ask myself about what I should say to prospective students to suggest why they should come here rather than go to Appalachian State, UNC-Charlotte, or some other graduate school. In these deliberations, I think I am essentially asking myself, "what makes Western unique," or at least "special." I have decided that what makes us unique is the combination of our size and vitality. We are a relatively small university, but we are an unusually vital academic community.

Because we are small, when students come here they get personal attention. Undergraduates don't have teaching assistants as instructors, and with very few exceptions they don't sit in classes larger than forty or forty-five. Graduate students usually end up being one of twelve or less and they are not going to have to compete with fifty other graduate students to get resources, assistantships, or even time with faculty. With only three hundred full-time Master's students, everyone gets a lot of personal attention at the graduate level.

Our small size also leads to an unusual vitality, to kinds of cooperative work between faculty and students that is really quite remarkable. The work on Master's theses is a prime example. Because we have such a small faculty, it would be very difficult for most departments to give release time for thesis work, so we don't pay faculty extra--either in money or in time--as other schools do. But we have very few complaints about this extra service, even with some individuals who are perhaps overloaded with thesis work. When I talk to students who have enrolled here and ask what keeps them happy at Western, they usually say it is the interaction with and the quality of the faculty. I believe that the willingness of our graduate faculty to take on thesis work without remuneration is an indication of an unusual dedication and vitality in our faculty as a whole, and I believe it is rare to have such a quality faculty for this sized institution.

Our vitality also shows up in areas where our size could be working against us--in our international programs for example. Although we don't have an unusually large number of international students on campus, we are working in Burkina Faso, Thailand, Jamaica, China, and Swaziland. If faculty are interested in those places, there is an opportunity to get involved. It's not like you have to be here for twenty years to get on the list to go to Jamaica. If you want to go to Jamaica and are teaching something related to the program, we will find a way to get you there. There is an incredible range of activities and interests among the faculty here.

Whatever you are interested in, there's someone else on the faculty you can talk to, and probably someone in a different discipline coming at it from a different perspective. Of course, if you go to Chapel Hill you expect that range and vitality, but what makes Western unique is to have this vitality in programs and faculty at a campus this small.

Of course, when people pose the question of what makes Western unique, one of the first answers to arise is the physical environment, and I would agree with many who feel that we have overplayed the physical environment as a unique element of Western. Nevertheless, when I go around and talk to people about Western, I take the brochure with the beautiful photographs and it always attracts a lot of attention. We perhaps get tired of hearing about how beautiful the area is, but we're jaded because we look at it all of the time. To some degree, it is a part of our uniqueness; but more importantly, our physical environment and our relative isolation perhaps help to create another aspect of our vitality, the sense of community in Cullowhee.

Though I spend a lot of time recruiting graduate students, as the Graduate Dean I also spend time recruiting faculty when candidates visit the campus. What attracts faculty to Western is different from what attracts students. Students may never feel the sense of vitality that comes from our sense of community, but when I interview prospective candidates for faculty positions, it is easy to "sell" Cullowhee because I can tell them that if they come here they are buying into a community, whether they want to or not. Part of this comes from our sense of isolation, but there are other factors as well--for example, the accessibility and relative lack of hierarchy here. You know that if you are working on something and you need to see Jack Wakeley, you can see him. People wander in and out of my office, Jack's office, the Deans' offices, and there is an openness about the place that is, again, remarkable. It gets expressed initially in the interview process through our remarkable hospitality, where people go out of their way to make visitors feel comfortable. This openness is probably related to our size and our sense of isolation, but it is also a product of our intellectual vitality. It is part of our sense of community, our culture. I have never heard anyone sit down and say this is how we do this. It just emerges because of what we are.

But I also believe that we have to verbalize these things to make sure they are noticed, appreciated, and maintained. And I think this is most important with the people who have been here for fifteen to twenty years because they are the most easily disaffected. When you are new and coming in, everything is just great, but the older faculty need to remember why they came here in the first place. They came and they stayed, not because they didn't have options but because this place filled a need for them and those needs are still being met. The basic educational mission at WCU hasn't changed in forty years. We have added some things, but the notion of taking students and graduating them better than when they came in is what we have been doing for a long time. You can't be here and not be interested in improving teaching and being effective in the classroom. That is the bottom line at Western. I tell people when they interview that this is a teaching institution, a community of scholars. Students, often a little under prepared, come here, spend a lot of time with a vibrant faculty, and become better scholars. They may not end up as Rhodes Scholars, but they are scholars, that is, people who can read and make sense of their lives. Whether they spend the rest of their lives reading literature, sociology, or the newspaper, they will spend their lives reading and reflecting, as scholars, and the faculty at WCU is responsible. WCUnique? Sure it is!

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