



# Faculty Forum

*From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence*

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

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## Is Intellectual Challenge the Norm at WCU?

What do the following situations imply about faculty expectations for students?

- (a) a course with no exams in which almost everyone receives a grade of 'A'
- (b) students who successfully complete 21 credit hours during a semester while holding jobs on the side
- (c) a student with a 3.95 average and a full-time job who is well-versed on all the new television programs
- (d) students who spend an average of one hour per week outside of class on each general education course
- (e) a graduate class that has not met for a month because the instructor is out on what one of the students calls "junkets."

No, these are not the latest accusations from Bill Bennett, Charles Sykes, or Alan Bloom. Unfortunately, they are **observations that could be made by anyone right here in Cullowhee, USA.** The instances described above indicate a failure to sufficiently challenge our students, don't they?.

Let's consider why we should want to challenge students. First, challenge is the major impetus for intellectual growth. Students and faculty members change their thinking as an adaptation to events that call into question their normal modes of thinking. Second, it is challenge that motivates us, that keeps us intellectually interested and involved. Finally, challenge is necessary to create a climate where ideas are considered valuable or considered at all. In short, challenge is one of the distinctive features of education and development.

Assuming that we all agree that we should be challenging our students, what then are the circumstances that could lead to the deplorable outcomes with which I began? Here are some possible obstacles to challenging our students. (If you don't find yourself in the first paragraph, maybe one or more of these will fit--I'm not going to tell you which ones apply to me):

1. **Lack of knowledge:** It is difficult to challenge your students when you are only a chapter or two ahead of them in their textbook or in the better one you use for your lectures. The ability to challenge requires knowledge that is broad and deep. That doesn't mean you will know it all, but you have to know enough to ask good questions. Lack of confidence caused by a lack of knowledge may be a big part of the problem. Challenging students also poses some risk for the teacher. If you get them thinking critically, they may ask you some unexpected questions and you may no longer be on the firm ground of simple truths. However, lack of knowledge can be overcome through extensive reading or research. A lack

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of nerve can be overcome through trying, accepting risk, and being well-prepared. Of course, supportive colleague or colleagues can also be a big help.

2. Beliefs about students: Certain beliefs about students and their ability to learn are the most pervasive and destructive obstacles to challenging students in the classroom. If you consistently attribute your students' failures to their inherent deficiencies rather than critically evaluating your own methods, your beliefs about those deficiencies will be maintained. If you believe that students can't learn because of low SAT scores, poor genes, poor high school preparation or whatever, you are unlikely to pose challenging material for their consumption. Or if you believe that your students are slow and thus must be taught with a slow pace and easy material, you will not challenge your students. I may be incredibly naive, and perhaps just wrong, but I think that the most ethical stance for me as a teacher is to assume that all my students can - (though they may not or may not be ready to) learn.

3. Time hoarding: It takes time to challenge students. You have to prepare and grade more assignments and exams, read more books and articles, and hold more hands. Spending 60 hours or more a week gathering research data, writing articles or books for publication, consulting or presenting workshops off-campus, or engaging in other high status activities will likely challenge you. But it will not lead your students to work even one more hour on the substance of the courses you teach. If you want to get serious about challenging your students, you better budget your time to provide both the challenge and the support required to balance it.

4. Concerns about student evaluations: Some challenging teachers may worry about poor student evaluations. This fear results from a lack of confidence (or tenure) and a poor evaluation system. We need to find a way to evaluate faculty members without punishing them for being challenging. The dean or department head who uncritically tallies complaints from students is a real threat to the challenging teacher's welfare. A second kind of concern about student response involves less evaluation anxiety but more guilt. It is a misplaced empathy with students over their plight. This usually appears in some kind of humanistic philosophical guise that seems to assume that student psyches are very fragile. Pervasive pockets of grade inflation may be a result of such thinking. I would be less concerned about grade inflation if I could be convinced that it was not correlated with the absence of significant challenge.

We would have to worry less about student response if we could manage to change the climate of our institution so that intellectual challenge became the norm. Faculty members have to find ways to model responses to intellectual challenges. We need to convince students that intellectual challenge is essential to the college classroom and to what goes on outside the classroom. We have to convince ourselves that the challenges we provide to our students are as important as those we provide to ourselves in the higher-status worlds of research and off-campus service. The outcome should be that our students read more, write more, and think more and leave Cullowhee smarter, not just older, than when they came.

*Bruce Henderson, Psychology*

*Our goal is to spark a lively, constructive dialogue, and all viewpoints are welcome. If you would like to respond to this opinion, indicate whether you want to be quoted by name or anonymously and send your response, whatever its length, to*

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