



# Faculty Forum

*From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence*

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

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## Remus Singularis In Aqua

You may recall Brutus in *Julius Caesar* observing that:

There is a tide in the affairs of men,  
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;  
Omitted, all the voyage of their life  
Is bound in shallows and miseries.

Something analogous, I think, may happen in the affairs of colleges. To extend the metaphor: the school which misses a floodtide of growing enrollment might for a time find itself in shallows or, at best, afloat with only one oar in the water.

Certainly this or something like it seems to have happened to Western Carolina University. It is no secret that its enrollment has remained almost static for the past two decades. And before faculty members grow euphoric when told of the rising SAT scores of WCU freshman, they might do well to compare our freshmen with those of our neighbors at UNC-Asheville and Appalachian State University. According to the "Board of Governor's Quarterly" for Fall 1991, a decade ago UNC-A's average freshman SAT score was 43 points above that of the UNC system average; ASU's was 5 point below; WCU's was 70 points below. Now, a decade later in 1991, UNC-A's average is 77 points above the system average; ASU's is 20 points above. And WCU's? Well, we're now 99 points below. So in '91-'92 measured against WCU, the absolute spread is 176 points in favor of UNC-A and 119 points in favor of ASU. And even as the disparity in academic preparation for entering freshman grew in that decade of the eighties, the enrollment in Asheville and Boone moved impressively upward. Now, to tear it all, this past September *U.S. News* ranked both UNC-A and ASU among the 15 "top regional universities" in the South.

Meanwhile, back in Cullowhee, we read the *Faculty Forum* to learn what our colleagues are doing individually to improve academic standards. And again, one is reminded of the boat with only one oar in the water. Unfortunately, academic standards cannot be raised by faculty members alone. The endeavor requires a deliberate university-wide policy.

Our present plight, I think, is an unhappy corollary of WCU's two-decade failure to heed Wade's Law which, with apologies to Thomas Gresham, I will state yet once more:

*Bad students drive out good students and, ultimately, even bad students.  
They don't want to be seen in each other's company.*

A college ignores this dictum at its peril, as those of us who work in classrooms at WCU know too well. Even our dogged recruiters, if asked, might concede that the consequences of the Law are ineluctable. The corroborating figures are before you.

The question now is, how did WCU come to be "bounded in [Academic] shallows and miseries"? A review of ancient history might be helpful here. Way back in 1969 the then-administration, gleefully anticipating a veritable flood of enrollment in the decade to come, was at work on yet another "Long-Range Study," a working projection for WCU's ever ballooning growth. Looking back, it all seems ludicrous. Our "Office of Institutional Research" (the title still

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confuses me) assured those of us doing the study that we should plan on having an FTE minimum of 7600 students in 1980, and more probably a maximum of 9400. When in my naiveté I expressed some doubt that we'd reach the minimum, I was almost hooted from the room. The man in charge of "University Development" (he now heads a junior college) told me in patronizing tones that WCU had always reached or exceeded projected figures for maximum enrollment. Even today I wonder if anyone shared my doubt. For the record I might add that when 1980 arrived we were almost 2000 short of the lower figure. And now, over two decades later, WCU remains about 1800 below the minimum.

As the Seventies marched on, it became evident to even our most optimistic administrators that enrollment at WCU was not going to grow as they'd hoped. In a formula-funded state school, students are money. What to do? Unable to attract sufficient numbers of reasonably well-prepared students, the then-administration hit on an ingenious alternative. After all, desperation is the mother of invention. An ephemeral and obscure publication of the era, the "Weekly Newsletter for Faculty and Staff" (29 August 1980) announced an amazingly circumlocutionary plan. Henceforth WCU would "target" the problem of "larger numbers of high school students with academic promise but serious verbal and mathematical skill deficiencies." With only rudimentary training in logic, I have some difficulty in understanding how one can determine that students "with serious verbal and mathematical skill deficiencies" do in fact have "academic promise." But that quibble aside, our current SAT scores average does seem to suggest that WCU's recruiting policies over the past two decades have been predicated on a dubious premise. And that brings us to where we are now. Remember the football coach who, in describing his team, said "They're not big, but they are slow"? Similarly, we at WCU might say, "We don't enroll as many freshmen as ASU, but those we do admit aren't as well-prepared."

So what can we do to raise academic standards here? What can WCU do to become, if not first among equals, then at least one among equals with UNC-A and ASU? And what can WCU ever do to join them on a list of "Top Regional Universities"?

There may be hope. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* for 22 January 1992 reports that "Enrollment projections have been revised upward, that enrollment will rise by almost two million by 2002." Perhaps this time we can make a rising tide of enrollment work to our advantage. If we will reduce the number of ill-prepared and lackadaisical applicants admitted, the number of motivated and capable students who apply will rise. Yes, there may be a temporary deceleration in our glacially-slow growth, until students hear that WCU has begun to emphasize standards. The likelihood thereafter of growing numbers and quality is almost assured. Let's face it, the emphasis on academic preparation has worked for ASU, UNC-A, NCSU, and UNC-CH. Honestly, what student wants to be part of something mediocre?

WCU really does have much to offer. Its faculty, present company excepted, is a good one. We have a very attractive and functional physical plant, and an exceptionally good library. The question is, now that we've built it, why don't they come? They don't because for two decades WCU has failed to emphasize strongly in its admission policies the academic standards which make a college attractive.

Obviously an abrupt change is not possible. There's an inertia in things academic as in physics. But a change of direction for WCU is unquestionably overdue, if the school is to serve its professed purpose, higher education. We can begin first by exercising standards with our present students: giving C's to those who are average, D's to those who are poor, and F's to those who fail. This will be a novel approach at WCU, and traumatic at first--at least for some faculty members. And, second, the faculty must insist on academic standards in WCU's admissions policies. Bring in good students. Teach them rigorously and require college-level performance of them. Then WCU could become in reality a place where, as Cardinal Newman said,

A habit of mind is formed which lasts through life. . . the special fruit of the education furnished at a university, as contrasted with other places of teaching or other modes of teaching. (*Idea of a University*)

*Phil Wade, English*