



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

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Illusion Is Not Deep Culture

The last four issues of the *Faculty Forum* have focused on WCU's uniqueness. Bruce Henderson drew the distinction between a community of scholars and a community of scholarship and suggested that we apply the critical thought of scholarship to everything that we do. Mike Malone reported that Western delivers on what it promises and stated that WCU is a place "where competent and caring faculty believe in the importance of teaching." Judy Stillion followed by writing about "deep culture" and listed 12 traits that contribute to WCU's uniqueness. Tony Hickey argued that faculty vitality and our size are what make us unique.

In his 1990 book Narcissistic Process and Corporate Decay, Howard Schwartz develops the idea that some organizations describe themselves in illusive ways and then insist that the illusion is real, thereby ignoring the "real work" of the organization. Schwartz argues that as the illusion moves further away from reality, more and more resources are siphoned off to keep the illusion alive. This increasingly diminishes the attention and energy devoted to the "real work" of the organization and eventually the organization is illusion. NASA, which allowed the *Challenger* tragedy, and the failing General Motors are examples of organizations that became distracted from their "real work" and succumbed to illusion.

Our concern is that the positive things written about valuing teaching and caring for undergraduate students are contributions to an illusion that prevents us from facing facts and taking on the "real work" that is defined in our mission statement. While there are faculty at WCU who value and engage in valuable teaching, at the institutional level we do not value teaching. Furthermore, with a few exceptions, we do not evaluate teaching using accepted and available scholarship. As a result, we have little valid data on whether or not there is excellent teaching, and the assessment of teaching is often impressionistic or occasionally a political judgment. Many faculty know little about the dynamics of the teaching-learning relationship, and the campus reward system (tenure, promotion, merit pay) frequently undervalues exceptional teaching. Furthermore, success in our professional fields is based on cosmopolitan activities like published research, while teaching is always a local activity. The successful teaching and real learning of the average WCU student is a very time-consuming, intense, down-in-the-trench activity that many faculty want

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nothing to do with. We pretend that there is widespread excellent teaching to hide the fact that many faculty have little intention of doing the level and degree of work necessary to teach well.

The important issue, the "deep culture" issue, is that as a community we do not value teaching undergraduate students. Furthermore, it is "against the rules" to deflate the illusion. To do so is to put oneself at risk. This situation is a "double bind," as Chris Argyris puts it, and organizations cannot learn and grow until the double bind is broken. It is imperative for us as a community to identify the situation and get it on our agenda so that we can work toward a solution. Unfortunately, while we may be a community of scholars, we are not a community of scholarship, and the probability of breaking the double bind is weak.

Given that we are stuck in the illusion, how do break out? Amitai Etzioni addresses Communitarianism, a philosophy of the rights and responsibility of living in community. He argues there is too much emphasis on individual rights and we have forgotten our responsibilities to the community. As a result, there is no moral voice. As members of a community of scholarship, we at WCU have a responsibility to speak with our moral voice and by doing so we collectively define the community. The organization should not be defined by the self-enhancing illusion but by community members in scholarly dialogue. Unfortunately, we have few forums in which to use our moral voice and critical thought to challenge the illusion. It may also be hazardous for those individuals who do so. Schwartz explains that those who have accepted the illusion cannot tolerate those who do not because they are a reminder that it is possible to be free. Again, we are caught in the doublebind. We are stuck in the illusion.

Perhaps George Keller's recent visit will help. He said things that members of WCU cannot. Do we have the will to follow through? We can continue the illusion, of course, or we can become a real community of scholarship dedicated to "student-teacher involvement in learning." We can use our moral voice, employ our skills as scholars, and direct our critical thought to challenging the illusion. We have all the talent we need; we just have to have the courage to use it. Are we interested in really living as scholars, demonstrating scholarly values and skills in the way we live in community? Is not hypocrisy the difference between what we say and what we do? One thing for sure, a retreat to narcissism bodes well for no one, ever.

Bill Kane and Terry Kinnear, Management

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If you would like to respond to this opinion piece, please send your comments by the 8th of the month either to Bill at 319E Forsyth, to Terry at 319C Forsyth, or to the FCTE. Please indicate whether you are willing to be quoted or prefer to remain anonymous.