



# Faculty Forum

*From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence*

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 4, No. 8

May 1, 1992

## Another Opinion Concerning Academic Standards

During the past few months I have read several viewpoints in the **Faculty Forum** and **notes & quotes** concerning "academic standards" at Western Carolina University. I have agreed with some, disagreed with others, and have become quite upset with a few. Recently, Phil Wade and Bruce Henderson have approached my viewpoint, but those that have upset me have stimulated me to respond with my own opinion on academic standards. Some readers may disagree with me, but I believe that in all this talk about academic standards there is a danger of grade inflation. I believe that academic standards are universal, that they are the same for whatever school a student might be attending, and that our responsibility as college professors is to apply these standards and require students to meet them.

I do not feel that it is always the professor's role to set standards. In addition to the professor, I believe that society and/or the discipline may set the standards as to what is expected from a student who has taken a given course or graduated with a degree in his major field, whether it be from WCU or from any other American campus. On the basis of our formal training and experience, we all have a feeling for this "standard" in our discipline and should be able to apply it consistently and fairly. I believe that an "A" means excellent, a "B" means good, a "C" means average, a "D" means poor, and an "F" means failing no matter where the student is studying. I have had classes with no "A's" and I have had classes with no "F's", and when a student receives an "A" in my class, I expect that "A" to reflect the image of excellence no matter where it might transfer.

Call it like it is but be honest with your colleagues universally; in my opinion a university is an institution for higher learning. Grades are nothing more than our evaluation of a student's ability to "master" a given level of our discipline. We as professors have had years of training in our chosen discipline and we should be able to evaluate the different performance levels in our classes. The student who does not demonstrate the ability does not "make the grade"; this does not mean that a person is doomed in life; it reflects a person's ability in a given discipline. If students cannot "make the grade" then give them an evaluation that you believe to be acceptable in today's society where they will be expected to perform. **To tell society that a student is capable of better performance than he/she has the demonstrated ability for is being dishonest.** All of us are not athletically inclined; neither are all of us academically inclined.

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I also believe that most students who have been accepted into this university can attain and meet the standards of higher education if they know what is expected of them. If we do not ask and expect their best, we will not receive it. For those students who are underprepared, we have remedial classes. **We should not use the class time that is owed to the prepared students to cater to the needs of the underprepared.** Those who satisfactorily complete remedial classes become prepared to meet the university standards. **If we inflate grades because of extra credit projects or rewards for class attendance, I believe that we are unnecessarily lowering our standards.** I am firmly committed to an "open door policy" at WCU, but I do not believe that this means an "automatic graduation policy."

In some cases, the failure of students to meet university standards is a result of poor motivation rather than insufficient ability. In these cases, I believe that we must be firm. Society does not cater to the unmotivated. Perhaps if this was emphasized to students at all levels, performance and grades would improve.

A university professorship means more than just teaching and we as a community should realize this. To create "good" students out of "poor" students requires the 100% commitment to teaching--and specifically to remedial teaching--that is typical of high school teachers. I am not saying anything negative about high school teachers; they deserve our praise. I am only pointing out that professors, unlike high school teachers, must also satisfy the demands of service and scholarship. Teachers and professors have similar but ultimately different roles in society, and universities employ professors.

**Jim Wallace, Biology**

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If you would like to respond to Jim's opinion piece, please send your comments either to Jim at 131 Natural Science or to Terry Nienhuis at the FCTE, 161 Hunter Library.