

What Does--Or Could--Make Western Unique?

Reading the first **Faculty Forum** created a sense of *deja vu* for me. I remember when a big name consultant came to Cullowhee and recommended a series of foci that WCU could use for establishing an institutional identity and developing a strategy for making do in difficult times. George Keller, author of Academic Strategy, read our publications and made suggestions that at least at that time made extraordinarily good sense to me. I don't have notes from his visit and my recollections are clouded by a number of experiences I have had since then, but I recall that Keller suggested an analysis of WCU's physical setting, strengths, weaknesses, and history that indicated a need to focus on at least three areas:

1. **Teaching.** WCU's history as a teacher's college and the existence of NCCAT and FCTE (both new at the time) suggested that we could become a center of expertise on teaching, from preschool through university levels.

2. **Natural resources.** With our physical location, we could build on strong academic bases programs in natural resource management, parks and recreation, and related areas .

3. **Ruralness.** Again, our location, history, and the existence of CIML suggested that many disciplines could serve as foundations for programs related to rural activities (rural education, rural businesses, rural health, etc.).

One could point to a number of campus activities that are indicative of some moves in the directions highlighted by Keller (including the FCTE and Faculty Forum). However, I think we could have done and should do much more to make ourselves unique. My subjective assessment of why we have not done more than we have is related to Keller's central concept of academic strategy: steeples of excellence. Keller argues that if an institution is to survive in the difficult climate faced by higher education, we must make self-conscious decisions to stress some things at the cost of others. My experience here has been that there is considerable resistance to the concept of steeples of excellence. Despite extant inequalities throughout the campus (in faculty salaries, teaching loads, allocation of equipment funds, etc.), faculty members and administrators seem to be frightened by the idea of putting strong emphasis on particular programs. If particular programs manage to do well, fine, but let's not radically change budgets, build faculties, or reallocate space to build steeples. That might damage the esteem of the programs that are not made steeples. Instead, let's allow a kind of social-academic Darwinism take hold and see what happens.

We have had some guidance in recent years on general goals for WCU (e.g., quality, image, enrollment, funding), but these are not likely to make us unique or build on any existing uniqueness. I suspect that most colleges and universities want to have quality, increase or stabilize enrollment, have a good image, and increase funding. If we are ever going to be truly unique, I think we are going to have to develop programmatic steeples of excellence that capitalize on our circumstantial strengths and weaknesses. Some programs are going to have to receive lots more resources and some are going to have to receive fewer, or even disappear.

What about the "community of scholarship" rubric as a base for our uniqueness? I believe the development of a community of scholarship is necessary to ensure the quality of whatever we do in teaching, research and service. Along with the rest of American culture in the 80's and 90's, we in the university are plagued by the twin trends toward individualism and relativism. The former leads to a breakdown in community and the latter has led to a breakdown in scholarship.

But being a community of scholarship is different from being a community of scholars. In a community of scholars, each member does his or her own thing and looks for recognition and reward for doing so. The hope is that the institution will look good because of the quality of the contributions made by individuals. This leads to an emphasis on cosmopolitan activities in the individual's discipline and the quest for status. It leads to turf-guarding, competition for resources, privatization and burrowing toward tenure among junior faculty, status-seeking through grant-getting, publication, attaining external accreditation, and a fear of the steeples of excellence concept. In the right atmosphere and context, some of these activities in and of themselves are not bad. However, without a countervailing community ethos, they are centripetal forces.

In a community of scholarship, there is two-pronged emphasis on quality that has to overcome the relativism, often disguised as academic freedom, that says whatever a faculty member does, inside or outside his or her classroom, is all right. First, a wide variety of activities do need to be recognized and rewarded in a multi-dimensional fashion. Faculty are valued because they are vital, not because they follow an inappropriate research university ideal that stresses only disciplinary and cosmopolitan activities. However, in my vision of a community of scholarship, all these activities, whether they be cosmopolitan or local, are continually evaluated against standards. The good news of acceptance of diversity has to be balanced by the sharp edge of critical community evaluation. Unfortunately, we have done a poor job on standard development.

The discussions of academic standards at WCU last year indicate to me that our existing standards for quality teaching have failed miserably in stamping out poor teaching. Students described teachers who read from textbooks in class, who fail to meet their classes, who offer poor advisement, who require little intellectual work, who are not current in the subjects they teach. Moreover, we have hardly begun to develop critical standards of quality (as opposed to quantity) in research and service activities. For example, faculty members on tenure and promotion committees and department heads often haven't read the publications they consider so important and haven't checked with the recipients of the faculty service or the quality of scholarship involved in that service. Furthermore, in a community of scholarship, we have to

link what we do to our overall mission. Given the nature of the students we serve and the differences between a comprehensive university and either a research university or a liberal arts college, we have to begin to make some hard decisions, as a community, about how we spend our limited time and financial resources.

Individualism and relativism have led us away from helping our students develop intellectually, and we are guilty of many of the excesses outlined by recent critics of higher education. We are not more self-centered or irresponsible than any other academics--we are just doing what academics have done for most of the last century--but if we want to be different, even unique, we will have to make the shift from being a community of scholars to being a community of scholarship.

Bruce Henderson, Psychology

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