



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

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Academic Standards at WCU

In his **Faculty Forum** article entitled "Is Intellectual Challenge the Norm at WCU?" (March '91), Bruce Henderson raised an issue we cannot ignore: are we setting high standards for student achievement or are we letting our students "slide by?" Bruce claims that some students spend only one hour per week outside of class on general education courses; others are able to complete heavy class loads while holding full-time jobs; and students sometimes find courses with no exams in which "almost everyone receives an 'A'."

My work with the Faculty Senate Subcommittee on Instruction leads me to believe that we do have a problem with academic standards at WCU. Although we do not yet have definitive data, our subcommittee discussions since last January have brought out four conditions that may foster low academic standards:

- (1) students with poor academic skills
- (2) a student culture which stresses social life more than academic preparedness
- (3) a faculty with low expectations of students
- (4) a faculty promotion system that penalizes professors who maintain high standards

Some of these conditions, like #1 above, are not easy to solve; but others, particularly #3, might be readily remedied if we take collective faculty action. I have heard many faculty discuss the importance of high academic standards for students. But do we care enough to band together to do something about standards on our campus? In response to Bruce's opinion last spring, Lee Minor asserted that "the only realistic way out of this mess" is for the faculty to come to some agreement about the problem and its solution. Our senate subcommittee on instruction agrees with Lee, and we believe our faculty are ready and willing to tackle this issue.

Our plan of action begins with a campus-wide discussion of academic standards at WCU, a discussion involving students as well as faculty and administrators. Recognizing that a proper balance between challenging and supporting students is a key to maintaining appropriate standards, we propose a year-long series of activities focused on the theme, "WCU Faculty: Dedicated to Challenging and Supporting Our

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Students." We hope to clarify what we mean by "high academic standards" and then suggest what we can do to make high academic standards an important part of our image as a regional university. With support from the FCTE steering committee, therefore, the following activities are planned for this year:

- (1) a year-long series of FCTE seminars which will bring students and faculty together to discuss the balance between challenge and support on our campus
- (2) asking faculty to share some of their approaches to achieving this balance
- (3) a Visiting Scholar presentation by Dr. James Eison, U. of So. Fla., who will speak about grades and academic standards (Sept. 26-27)
- (4) a series of sessions for department heads to see if this issue can be included on their departmental agendas this year
- (5) asking the university strategic planning committee to address this issue in the strategic plan
- (6) dissemination of research on student study habits

If our discussions are fruitful, they may lead to collective faculty action or policy development next year. If you are interested in participating in these discussions, contact me (7415) or Ben Ward (7196). Let us know if you can think of additional activities that will help us focus on high quality instruction here at WCU.

What will it mean if this next academic year passes and only a few people get involved in these discussions? Could it mean that

- (1) we really don't care about high academic standards?
- (2) we despair of finding a solution and feel it's not worth the effort?
- (3) we are holding out for more extrinsic rewards?

I don't believe any of these conclusions accurately portray the vast majority of our faculty. If you have opinions on any of these questions or if they trigger others along this line, your comments will guide our planning as we develop activities throughout the year.

Casey Hurley, Administration, Curriculum, & Instruction

Editor's Call for Responses: Casey's essay is filled with questions. If you find any particularly pertinent or provocative, send your comments to Casey Hurley, Dept. of Admin., Curric., & Instruction, Killian Bldg., or to me, Terry Nienhuis at the FCTE, 161 Hunter Library. Please indicate whether you are willing to be quoted or prefer to remain anonymous.