



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

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Who is Valued in Our Teaching/Learning Community?

Whew! The rush is over! Operation Jumpstart (A Computer for Every Freshman) nearly wore the soles off our shoes. As part of the staff and faculty and administrative team that prepared for this fall's freshmen, I spent most of my time since January working with faculty and other staff on the Computer Implementation Jumpstart Manuals and helping to plan and then carry out the Computer Implementation Workshops for faculty, trainers, and students. Only the perspective of time will tell us how well we did and how amazing our feat might have been. But my participation in these activities has also brought a side effect that I had not expected. By the end of the first week of classes, I was feeling a new and euphoric sense that we, the staff, are very important and valued contributors to the teaching and learning community at WCU.

I am part of that amorphous group called "staff." We hold various roles at WCU, most of which run twelve months a year, forty hours a week. We are office support personnel who take care of daily office functions; we are the people who keep the computers operating; we research and prepare reports for General Administration; we keep the buildings clean and safe; we seek financial assistance for students; we see that housing and counseling needs are met; we help faculty; and we make sure that operations run as smoothly as possible. We are the people who like to think that we help faculty and students create an environment where excellence in teaching and learning is the norm.

But sometimes we wonder how faculty view our contributions. Some of us are not sure where we fit in to this educational community. Where do secretaries and Physical Plant workers fit? What about people working in the Faculty Center, in Student Services, in Hunter Library, or Continuing Education, to name only a few more? Faculty and administrators are clearly defined and clearly valued groups. But what about staff? To some extent, I think, staff members suffer from an identity crisis in this and probably every other university in America, perhaps because the term, "staff," covers so many people in so many diverse roles that it is difficult to think of staff members as a cohesive unit. In mulling over these thoughts, I came up with the following questions:

- Collegiality:** do faculty and administrators consider staff members to be colleagues?
- Governance:** as we investigate questions of faculty governance, do these governance procedures explicitly (or even implicitly) include staff as well as faculty?
- Emeritus Status:** we have Faculty and Chancellor Emeritus status. Is there a Staff Emeritus status? If not, should we have one?
- Communication Devices:** the Faculty Forum is a faculty publication. But how many staff members receive this publication? Are there in-house publications by, for, and about staff? Is it worth the trouble and expense to create a new publication, adding it to the huge list we already have?
- Advancement:** are there career paths for staff that lead to administrative jobs at WCU?

- The Reward System:** is it significant that some staff members are still required to use the "time card" method? What extrinsic incentives are there for staff to demonstrate that they are going beyond the basic "work plan"? Do staff members get recognition for publications and/or presentations at conferences?

But this summer's blitzkrieg to get ready for our new computer program was so exhilarating that some of these concerns now seem to have diminished in importance. Working alongside other staff members, faculty, administrators, and students, I came this summer to feel like a genuine colleague. Working in other buildings, with other departments, and with other people, I had such a strong sense that we were pulling a huge load together, and when we finally arrived successfully, every one of us felt part of a valued and respected team working side-by-side for an important common goal.

But some questions remain. How long will this euphoric feeling last? Furthermore, when I consider staff members in general, am I a special case because I just happen to work so closely with this extraordinary computer challenge? Do other staff members feel as I have in the past--that they might not be viewed as valued participants in the university's educational process? If this is so, what can be done to make staff members feel a stronger sense of cohesiveness and a more secure sense of pride in their contributions to the academic community? At WCU, I would like to see a more concerted effort to make staff more clearly defined, more visible, and more fully appreciated as contributors to the teaching and learning environment.

We in the Faculty Center have worked with faculty more closely than ever before, feeling a common cause that is easy to view. I am confident that our work from this summer has been appreciated by many and that what we did this summer has had and will continue to have a positive impact on our students. But what can we do to spread this feeling around even farther and make it last? For starters, I would propose:

- that a staff publication be created to give the group a clearer sense of identity
- that staff be actively recruited and encouraged to join the U-Club in greater numbers
- that the faculty governance document spell out explicitly the equity of staff and faculty in the governance process and make clear avenues for staff input in the governance process
- that a study be made of the channels by which members of the academic community enter the administrative ranks to ensure that staff members have appropriate access
- that starting with this publication, we make a more concerted effort to see staff as partners in the teaching and learning venture that defines WCU

It has been close to 20 years since I first stepped off the WCU campus as an undergraduate student. Since then, I have spent over 18 years working full-time as a staff member in the North Carolina community college system and at WCU. I see daily the positive effects that we, as staff, have on the educational process, and so far, 1998 has been a wonderful year. But what can we do to spread this feeling around even farther and make it last? For starters, perhaps everyone who reads this essay should consider sharing it with a staff member who might not be on the Faculty Forum mailing list, encouraging that person to e-mail Weedman to be included in next month's mailing. Let's find ways to highlight the contributions that staff members make to our academic community.

Beth Leftwich, Media Specialist--Coulter Faculty Center

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