

The "Great Conversation": Direct and Indirect Communication

The university has been defined as “the Great Conversation” and, to a large measure, that’s what it is. Our work is accomplished largely in conversation with others, our institutional direction emerges from conversation, and specific plans and priorities are set through conversation. Communication is at the heart of our enterprise.

As many of you are aware, I have been encouraging people to communicate directly with me. My e-mail number has been published (Jbardo@wpoff.wcu.edu), and I have been attempting to meet and talk with as many people as possible.

This direct level of communication is important for several reasons. First, since I am new to Western, about the only way that I have of getting a sense of the campus is through communication. Direct communication with as many constituencies as possible is by far the best way for me to develop an immediate understanding of issues and needs. Second, over the longer run, direct communication is critical as a “monitoring” device to enable me (and others) to judge when we are straying off course and when there are major problems developing. Third, there are some issues that just truly need to go to the Chancellor. Direct communication provides the fastest mechanism for those issues to be dealt with. All of these are important reasons to foster direct communication.

To encourage direct communication, I see several new routes that could encourage a free exchange of opinions and ideas. For example, I consider E-mail immediate and efficient (traditional mail is slower but still effective). Additionally, I have instituted and/or planned various face-to-face meetings (“teas,” departmental visits, informal conversations, retreats, etc.) that will allow an exchange of ideas. I also envision regular “updates from the Chancellor” on issues of interest to the campus.

As important as direct communication is, I also strongly believe in the value of indirect communication. This university has distributed significant responsibilities to deans and vice chancellors. We are also working to continue distributing authority to the departmental level. Many issues within the University need to be dealt with by these other University officers, and I encourage you to communicate with them as well as with me.

In our society, it is axiomatic that “information is power.” But information has a unique property in the collegiate environment that it might not have in any other: the more you share information with others, the more power you have. On a University campus, power comes not

from possessing information but from sharing it. This year, especially, I would encourage us to think about the following communications issues:

- We are in an environment and time when we can promote meaningful communication. What is standing in our way? How can we minimize barriers to real communication?
- How do we communicate with each other and with other groups? Do we have styles of communication that keep us from hearing the other person? I am a strong believer in the statement that many people on a campus share a common interest in an issue though their positions may differ. To what extent can we improve our communications by looking at our interests rather than our positions?
- Do we minimize the value of communication by personalizing the conversation? To what extent are our campus communications hurt by personalization rather than arguing interests?
- Do we listen to all components of our campus community? What are our students really telling us about their experiences here? Are they finding the campus and their experiences at WCU to be satisfying both intellectually and affectively? What about the other key players on the campus; do we have mechanisms to hear them?
- To what extent do preconceived notions of the other person limit our willingness to communicate? Are these notions based on our personal experience or on a generalized reputation?
- How are we preparing ourselves to communicate with diverse populations? If our diversity plans are productively implemented, we will be dealing increasingly with people who do not necessarily communicate in the same styles that we do. Are we ready for this change and how do we accommodate their need to state their positions? How do we come to understand their interests?

We are beginning a very important debate and discussion on this campus concerning our future direction and approaches. Effective communication with all constituencies is going to be critical for that debate. I invite you to join this "great conversation."

John Bardo, Chancellor

Comments or Questions?

If you would like to respond to Chancellor Bardo's **Forum** piece with comments or questions of your own, please send them to the Faculty Center by the 8th of the month. Your response will be published in **notes & quotes** on the 15th.