

## **A Ropes Course for WCU**

Many people realize that a wilderness experience like a high or low ropes course is an effective experiential learning tool. So why is WCU--a school which prides itself on commitment to teaching and a community of scholarship--lagging behind other schools like ASU, UNC-C, UNC-CH, and Western Piedmont Community College in using such powerful educational experiences for our students?

A ropes course is a carefully designed set of tasks (similar to a military obstacle course) that requires for completion a great deal of planning, cooperation, leadership, risk-taking, teamwork, trust, ingenuity, and perseverance. Unlike the military obstacle course, participants do not compete against each other but must cooperate to solve a set of experiential problems. For example, a low ropes course might resemble a giant spider's web made of rope suspended between a group of trees. To negotiate all the participants through the web, everyone must address specific communication issues similar to situations in the classroom or workplace. Lessons are learned experientially, which tends to have a greater impact than ordinary classroom sessions. Ropes courses are widely used by all kinds of organizations such as corporations, hospitals, schools, and universities.

At present, Western is engaged in a paradigm shift, a significant change in how we "educate" students and create a caring university environment. This shift is reflected in our efforts to create learning communities, restructure the admissions process, initiate a co-curricular transcript, develop a new system of university governance, collaborate with Sylva businesses, review General Ed and USI-130, increase service learning and volunteerism, and build a leadership training program. While no one piece of equipment can remedy all of our problems, retain all of our students, or redesign our curriculum, a ropes course could be a significant part of the "high-touch" hardware for this rapidly changing "hi-tech" educational community.

### **Top Ten Reasons For Committing Resources to the Development of a Ropes Course at WCU**

- 10) It is Part of Something Bigger than Self:** Many high ropes course graduates note their new or revived experience of a "higher power"--a spirit, a force, a god--while working through the many challenges.
- 9) Healthy Challenges:** Our students tell us with words and actions that they need and

want to be challenged in ways that "push the envelope" of experience. Outward Bound has used experiential or expeditionary learning as a way to help young people combat drug, alcohol, and emotional problems and to become more responsible citizens. Why not offer our students an attractive and healthy alternative to challenge their bodies and minds?

- 8) **Collaboration:** As Student Affairs Vice Chancellor Bob Caruso acknowledged recently, the "historic division" between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs is being narrowed and collaborative efforts are on the rise. Here's another way to combine the skills and disciplines of faculty and staff to aid the personal and professional growth of our students.
- 7) **To Value Differences:** Ropes courses teach participants how to listen, value, and use each player's voice, opinion, and differing experiences and skills. Everyone is important. Success is dependent on everyone working together.
- 6) **Personal Investment and Consequences in One's Own Learning:** What better way to feel connected to what you are learning than to have obvious obstacles to overcome, personal and relationship risks to take, and clear markers to celebrate success?
- 5) **Leadership:** Currently, the Leadership Team is listening to students about their need and desire for a planned and professionally managed training in leadership. A ropes course could be a significant cornerstone of this leadership development experience.
- 4) **Team Building:** A traditional use of initiative courses is the building of group communication skills and trust. Caesar Hunt (formally of the Admissions Office) and Chris Gunn facilitated three meetings in Spring '97 between key student leaders representing white fraternities and black athletes to address inter-group tensions at that time. Though these "table talks" were reported to be quite successful and meaningful, having an action-oriented "classroom" to build trust and teamwork would have been even better. This tool for team building would be available to student groups, clubs, organizations, university departments, staffs, and even committees.
- 3) **Identity:** As has been recently argued by professors Herzog and Phipps, WCU has a prime location within a pristine geographic area that encourages an identity, a "sense of place," that integrates and synthesizes our natural environment and a WCU education. This identity could be successfully used to attract students (and faculty) who value a "community of scholarship" utilizing our outdoor environment as a classroom.
- 2) **Retention:** As the literature in student development has researched and argued for years, retention of students is related to students feeling a sense of belonging outside the classroom. Ropes courses connect students to each other and to staff and faculty in a way that is qualitatively different from any other pedagogical approach.
- 1) **Big Benefit for Dinky Dollars:** University Center Director, Tim Jacobs, estimates that

a high quality course could be built at Western (and using minimal space) for \$30,000 to \$42,000. Already this year since May, WCU has spent over \$7000 to take student groups off-campus to use such courses elsewhere. Obviously, compared to other capital projects currently underway here, this is a small price tag with a relatively quick payback period. (And compare this price tag to the rumored \$50,000 we are paying Bob Dole for his brief tour of Western!)

So, if we are concerned with teaching, learning, community, development, change, and using the resources unique to the region, instead of waiting for an administrative appointment of a committee, let's form one ourselves. Where are the people who are willing to look at the logistics of implementing a ropes course here, to develop a proposal, and to find the funds? If you are willing to help get this kind of course off the ground (so to speak), call or e-mail April Lewandowski (x7264; Lewandowski) or Chris Gunn (x7469; Gunn).

**Chris Gunn, Assistant Director, Counseling and Psychological Services, and  
April Lewandowski, English**

*The opinions printed here belong solely to the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the editorial staff or of the Faculty Center. If you would like to respond, e-mail Nienhuis by the 8th of the month.*