

Faculty Governance: Now or Never?

The remarks about faculty governance by Terry Kinnear, Chair of the Faculty, and John Bardo, Chancellor, at the August 14, 1996, General Faculty meeting provide the opportunity for the General Faculty to move WCU's faculty governance to another level. Terry, with his comments about dreams and responsibilities, and Chancellor Bardo, with his support of Terry's thesis, present us, the General Faculty, with a critical choice. We can choose to do business as usual (which Terry suggests is less than satisfactory), we can further withdraw (which I believe would be disastrous), or we can proactively engage in faculty governance and fulfill those responsibilities assigned to faculty by the *Faculty Constitution of Western Carolina University*. I suggest the latter.

We faculty take a lot for granted. We assume that the context in which we live our professional lives is a given. Freedom of speech, academic freedom and tenure, responsibility for curriculum, autonomy to allocate our time, and all the other reasons we chose academic life have always existed, at least in our professional lifetimes, so we do not question their continuance. However, each of the above facets of our academic lives is being challenged somewhere in higher education, and we run the risk of that life being irrevocably changed, even at WCU. At WCU, each faculty member must invest some of his or her time and talent in faculty governance, thereby preserving and advancing what the faculty says it values. If we do not, we will lose our freedoms through default, and we are already headed down that road.

In the study of groups there is a practice called social loafing, sometimes called free riding. Social loafers or free riders want the benefits of the group but they are not willing to provide the input and support the group needs to provide the desired result. How many free riders can faculty governance carry before it collapses from lack of needed participation? In a less extreme position are those who fear the consequences of speaking out, getting involved, and perhaps alienating those in power. Tenure and promotion do weigh heavily as faculty take the risk to govern themselves, but as faculty governance becomes stronger, risk is lessened, and the alternative to the risk of involvement is the risk of abdicating responsibility--in the end a far greater risk.

Ask yourself, am I investing into my profession time and talent in some proportion to what I am taking out? If you decide you could do more, what do you do? Select one of the areas of faculty responsibility (e.g. curriculum, faculty status, the academic aspect of student affairs) and do your homework. Become familiar enough with the topic so that you can be an informed participant. Become knowledgeable enough to be able to tell when anyone is misrepresenting the facts or the process. Particularly in today's environment, knowledge is power. Individually and collectively

we are powerless only if we choose to be, and to choose not to be knowledgeable is to choose powerlessness. A critical component of faculty governance lies in the work that you do in your department. Initiate and/or participate in an ongoing conversation about faculty governance within your department. How might we raise standards? How might we reform our curriculum? How do we optimize our students' learning? How do we respond to the monumental forces driving change? Without such a conversation, departments have no basis for carrying out their basic responsibilities. Talk to each other! And talk about governance!

In his remarks at the General Faculty meeting Chancellor Bardo specifically asked departments to accomplish a number of tasks concerning courses, curriculum, and scheduling. These are fundamental faculty governance tasks. The Chancellor has clearly articulated his expectations and has thereby provided departments the opportunity to step up and be professionally responsible, to make fundamental faculty governance decisions.

There are other basic departmental activities that you can initiate or participate in. For example, read your departmental Annual Faculty Evaluation/Tenure, Promotion, Reappointment (AFE/TPR) document. Insist that your department abide by it; you have that right. If the AFE/TPR document is not satisfactory, change it. Departmental AFE/TPR documents are supposed to be reviewed each academic year and revised, if so desired, with the approval of the Dean and the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs.

Department heads are supposed to be evaluated every three years (deans every five years.) Is this happening? Is there a satisfactory process in place? If not, change it. The Faculty Handbook contains a number of other departmental faculty responsibilities. Read your handbook! You might find some interesting surprises.

Carry activism at the departmental level to the college level. Does your college have bylaws? Do all members of the college live by them? There are important committees at the college level such as the Annual Faculty Evaluation Committee (in some colleges), the Tenure Promotion and Reappointment Committee, the Curriculum Committee (however named), and the Dean's Advisory Committee, for example. Are the faculty members of these committees representative of the college faculty, of your views? Are the members doing their homework and making informed decisions? Do these committees make decisions on some rational basis, in accordance with our governance documents, or have they devolved into decision making on a political basis? Do you talk to the committee members and provide your perspective on governance? If you feel that your views are not being represented, run for an elective committee membership. Campaign, organize other colleagues of similar views, and change that which you wish to see different. Colleges are supposed to be self-governing bodies in the larger context of the university. Get involved, help govern.

Chancellor Bardo is giving WCU's faculty the opportunity to step forward, get involved, and make faculty governance what it could be. I believe he is sincere, but this may be our last chance. If the faculty will not govern within its areas of defined responsibilities, the administration will be forced to move into the vacuum and take over the faculty's responsibilities. We, the faculty, will have helped destroy the university through our neglect. Universities without faculty governance will be white collar "factories," and the life that we say

we value will disappear. During Chancellor Bardo's tenure we have the opportunity to develop, improve, and strengthen faculty governance. We have the opportunity to so ingrain new and improved faculty governance into our department, college, and university cultures that future generations of administrators will take it for granted.

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