



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

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*Last month we had an overflow response to Dick Bruce's opinion piece on research and teaching, so we are continuing the responses in this, our last issue for the academic year. We believe that the **Forum** has gotten stronger this year and we look forward to making it even better next year. Our goal is to make the **Forum** a place where important dialogue is regularly initiated and continued, a place where our sense of academic community is nurtured and exemplified. Send us an opinion piece or a teaching tip for the fall and have a good summer!*

Faculty Responses

I believe the tension between research and teaching is real; I feel it at a personal level almost daily. Further, I believe the conflict creates an issue our community should continue to debate. There is no easy resolution to the conflict, but some things seem clear to me. First, as indicated in an earlier **Faculty Forum** piece by Bill Kane, there is no empirical evidence of a correlation between research and teaching performance. Second, I know of no evidence to support the assumption that only individuals who regularly publish or obtain grants "keep up" with the literature, maintain a level of competence needed for university teaching in any discipline, or are more motivated scholars.

It is clear to me that research activities can and often do interfere with teaching. The simple fact is that WCU is not funded the way research universities are. Our funding formula has not changed since the days when the "normal" teaching load was set at 12-15 hours per semester. Whenever faculty members have their semester teaching load set at 9, 6, 3, or 0 hours, somebody during that semester has to pick up the slack. This may be done through higher loads in other departments, increased class size, use of graduate assistants in labs, use of part-time faculty, etc. Research also interferes with teaching when faculty members avoid assigning students activities that require more time to set up or grade. Emphasis on research can also become a shield. The rhetoric about research on this campus is sometimes greater than the actual levels of research productivity. Rates of publication and research grant acquisition are sometimes surprisingly low in departments where teaching loads have been reduced in the name of research or graduate teaching.

At least two different underlying problems are reflected in the teaching/research tension. One is the question of status (often confused erroneously with "quality"). A popular distinction is made in higher education between "cosmopolitans" and "locals." Cosmopolitans are heavily involved in activities outside their own campuses--activities such as research for publication, editing, and other disciplinary functions that draw them away from students and the local campus. Locals, on the other hand, are involved more on their own campuses with the education of students, especially undergraduate students. Although the distinction is simplistic, I believe it really does represent and influence the perceptions of administrators, public information

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personnel, and faculty members. It is an unfortunate fact of academic life that status accrues to cosmopolitans. Rewards like tenure, promotion, and merit increases come more easily to cosmopolitans. Locals, regardless of the quality of their contributions, are frequently unappreciated, unrecognized, and underpaid despite the fact that they are the backbone of an institution like ours.

The other problem is with the concept of "scholarship." Scholarship is too often equated with "productivity" (i.e., research and publication) when scholarship is an end in itself and not a means to another end. Research and publication can express scholarship, but there are many ways for the reading, thinking, and creativity involved in the processes of scholarship to be expressed. What we need at WCU are active scholars of many kinds. Indeed, we need researchers who work and learn with students. But we also need scholars who do research on how students learn and scholars who put their efforts into challenging students, continually evaluating the content and methods of their teaching.

I am not "anti-research" as anyone who watches how I spend my time would report. But at an institution like Western we cannot afford to endorse a research model without knowing how this model will affect the education of the students we serve.

Bruce Henderson, Psychology

We do not question the value of research as it is broadly interpreted. The problem is that in some schools of the university "research" is narrowly defined as publications in refereed journals.

It is academic curiosity that leads a faculty member to consider a question to be researched, and academic curiosity obviously has a close relationship with teaching effectiveness. What is not obvious is whether the academic curiosity required in teaching is the same as the academic curiosity required in publication, or whether academic curiosity can only be demonstrated by publication.

Furthermore, the implied equation of teaching effectiveness and publication overlooks the concept of labor specialization. In industry, for example, people are not asked to be proficient in design, engineering, manufacturing, and sales. Historically, institutions of higher education have specialized either in research and graduate education on the one hand or in undergraduate teaching on the other. Even at our institution we have a special designation of "graduate faculty." Does this not imply some specialization? Would you not expect specialization to generate greater output for all? The skills required to be a good teacher are not the same as the skills required to publish. Undergraduate teaching requires broadening, synthesizing, integrating, and developing academic curiosity, while to publish one must focus and concentrate efforts on a specialized topic. These are mutually exclusive professional paths. For the publisher, time spent teaching becomes an interruption since large blocks of time and isolation are required for effective work. This is evidenced by the fact that a standard method for increasing publication output is the reduction of contact hours with students. To equate publication and teaching effectiveness violates the sound economic principle of labor specialization.

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