

Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

Responses to Bruce Henderson

Once again, Bruce Henderson has hit the nail on the head. Every time he writes for the **Faculty Forum** we can count on clear thinking, precise prose, and solutions to some of our most pressing problems. I recall that Bruce also wrote an opinion piece last year that counseled faculty to give students lots of support ("Encouraging Student Risk-Taking By Balancing Challenge and Support," **Faculty Forum**, February 1, 1990). In that piece, Bruce begins with a crucial sentence: "One of the trickiest aspects of teaching is finding that precarious balance between adequately challenging students and providing sufficient support so that students will take exploratory risks." Obviously, Bruce's March **Faculty Forum** opinion is a companion to the earlier piece, but I think that Bruce's concept of "balance" must be reemphasized. I worry about faculty taking Bruce's exhortations out of context and confusing intellectual challenge with destructive kinds of confrontational pedagogy.

There are probably some faculty at WCU who teach badly when they think they are "challenging" students--faculty who pitch their presentations far above the students' heads, faculty who are proud because so many students flunk their tests, and faculty who abuse students verbally, sometimes even to their faces. This is obviously not the kind of challenge Bruce has in mind. The challenge he has in mind obviously works hand in glove with support. Let no one misunderstand what Bruce means by "challenge" and feel justified in bad teaching. I agree that we should make more demands of our students, but when we challenge them, we must do it with a smile and be patient with their fumbling, showing them at the same time how to succeed. Challenge is always balanced with support--that's the delicate "balance" that constitutes excellent teaching.

anonymous

The answer to Bruce Henderson's question, "Is Intellectual Challenge the Norm at WCU?," is, in my opinion, a resounding "NO." Fortunately, the accompanying Teaching Tip by Stephen Ayers suggests the only realistic way out of this mess: "If all faculty in this university would rally round . . . , we could banish mediocrity and begin to celebrate superiority in student performance."

Lee Minor, Mathematics

I would like to thank Bruce for his "challenging" comments. There is truth in what he is saying, that challenge takes time and perhaps some individuals do not adequately challenge their students. This is most obvious when I get advisee's grades and all students in a particular class received "A's."

However, I would also like to "challenge" some of Bruce's comments. First of all, he contradicts himself in paragraphs 1 and 3. In paragraph 1 he states that a lack of knowledge can be overcome by "extensive research." In paragraph 3 he states that "gathering research data" may challenge the professor but not the student. But one cannot truly separate research and teaching. If one is committed to lifelong learning as a profession, then conducting research to quench the thirst for knowledge is part of the process. Dr. Henderson admits that reading what our colleagues have written is the other important way to overcome our lack of knowledge. If no professors did research, there would be little new knowledge to read.

Second, I have yet to conduct any research study in which I did not either use the research results

in providing new knowledge for my students or involve students in some part of the research study. Third, by keeping research skills "tuned," one is more capable of guiding students in independent studies. Fourth, writing and presenting forces one to learn. Attending professional conferences or "engaging in other high status activities" allows one to gather teaching ideas from presentations and discussions. Thus, one is learning in order to better "challenge" one's students.

Bruce's comments are well-taken and I concur with his basic premise--that we all need to be conscientious in challenging our students. But please remember that there is more than one means to an end.

Susan Brown, Sport Management

The premise of Bruce Henderson's March 1, 1991 **Faculty Forum** piece is that intellectual challenge is not the norm at WCU. On balance, my observations and experiences support that premise. Working from the assumption that a college education is about intellectual challenge, some disturbing questions come to mind. If intellectual challenge is not the norm, what is? If intellectual challenge should be the norm and is not, what happened? Was it ever the norm? If so, how did we get from that norm to whatever norm that now prevails? If not, how did a norm antithetical to intellectual challenge develop? Last, but not least, how or why did a faculty, which has as its responsibility the quality of our students' education, permit such a state of affairs to come to pass?

Bill Kane, Management/Marketing