

Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

Response to "What Does--or Could--Make WCU Unique?"

Faculty Forum article by Terry Nienhuis, 9/1/92

We received only one written response to this month's opinion piece, but it was so thorough, thoughtful, and provocative that we decided to print the complete text as next month's Forum article. To whet your appetite, here are a few excerpts from the forthcoming piece by Bruce Henderson.

I remember when a big name consultant came to Cullowhee and recommended a series of foci WCU could use for establishing an institutional identity and developing a strategy for making do in difficult times. George Keller, author of Academic Strategy. . . suggested that an analysis of WCU's physical setting, strengths and weaknesses, and history indicates a need to focus on at least three areas: (1) teaching, (2) natural resources, and (3) ruralness.

Keller argues that. . . we must make self-conscious decisions to stress some things at the cost of others. . . . Despite extant inequalities throughout the campus (in faculty salaries, teaching loads, allocation of equipment funds, etc.), faculty members and administrators seem to be frightened by the idea of putting strong emphasis on particular programs. If they manage to do well, fine, but let's not radically change budgets, build faculties, or reallocate space to build "steeples of excellence". . . . Instead, let's allow a kind of social-academic darwinism take hold and see what happens.

If we are ever going to be truly unique, I think we are going to have to develop programmatic steeples of excellence that capitalize on our circumstantial strengths and weaknesses. Some programs are going to have to receive lots more resources and some are going to have to receive fewer, or even disappear.

What about the "community of scholarship" rubric as a base for our uniqueness? . . . Being a community of scholarship is different from being a community of scholars. In a community of scholars, each member does his or her own thing and looks for recognition and reward for doing so. . . . In a community of scholarship, there is two-pronged emphasis on quality that has to overcome the relativism, often disguised as academic freedom, that says whatever a faculty member does, inside or outside his or her classroom, is alright.

. . . Our existing standards for quality teaching have failed miserably in stamping out poor teaching. . . . Given the nature of the students we serve and the differences between a comprehensive university and either a research university or a liberal arts college, we have to begin to make some hard decisions, as a community, about how we spend our limited time and financial resources.

Indeed we are guilty of many of the excesses outlined by recent critics. Individualism and relativism have led us away from helping our students develop intellectually. Yet, we are not more self-centered or irresponsible than any other academics. We are just academics doing what academics have done for most of the last century. If we want to be different, even unique, we will have to make the shift from being a community of scholars to being a community of scholarship.

Bruce Henderson, Psychology