

Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "Student Learning is a Faculty Problem" by Bill Kane and Terry Kinnear, 4/1/01

I have mixed reactions to Bill and Terry's pointing the finger of responsibility at faculty for "the general failure of learning at WCU." I understand their arguments and agree that we (faculty and staff) could challenge students more effectively. But I disagree with the authors' assertion that there is a "general failure of learning" at Western. Numerous students I have taught and counseled have blossomed and celebrated their intellectual and emotional growth while here. But I do agree with Bill and Terry's tacit thesis: Individuals can and do make the difference.

Yes, I know first hand WCU's Culture-of-Silence Rule #1: "It is against the rules to acknowledge the fact that critical issues are not discussed." I agree that "true dialogue" on the "previously undiscussable" needs to take place. Perhaps that dialogue needs to include changing the reward system, as the authors suggest, to be focused on student learning (or has that "dialogue" already taken place and the system continues to reward faculty behaviors that actually take time away from good teaching? Hmmmm. . . .). True, good educators "rise above the extrinsic reward system" and teach well because it's the "right thing" to do. But is there not some parallel here? Are the authors expecting our students to rise above non-challenging classes and learn for the sake of learning because it's the right thing? No. The authors understand clearly and are advocating changing course evaluation criteria and approaches to teaching to assist students in their learning, just as the extrinsic reward system needs to be changed to assist faculty in their teaching.

Bill and Terry offer to facilitate discussions, to help us discover "creative ways to resolve the difficulties and deficiencies of student learning." Having experienced the Western Ways, they ask wisely, "But will the faculty come?" I ask the parallel: would students in "dumb downed" classes come?

Change is hard--cultural change even harder. Individuals can and do make the difference.
Thanks Bill and Terry.

Chris Gunn, Counseling & Psychological Services

Kinnear and Kane state that though as faculty we can "offer the students subject matter knowledge, can structure learning opportunities, can provide clarification and can lend support, we obviously cannot learn for our students. They have to learn how to do this for themselves and we are not helping them do it." May I pass along the words from Vincent Tinto, whom I heard speak at a recent conference. A faculty member asked Tinto what to do with students who didn't have the skills to pass her course. He answered quite frankly that we (the university, and the teachers) have a "moral obligation" to assist the students whom we accept. In other words, if we let the students into Western, if by accepting them we signal to them that they are up to our standards, then we MUST, as Kinnear and Kane both suggest, enable them to learn in our community.

April Lewandowski, English

I want to thank Bill Kane and Terry Kinnear for the issues they raised in "Student Learning is a Faculty Problem." Their Forum piece was thoughtful, provocative, and, for me, personally disturbing because of the questions the article generated regarding my own attitudes toward student learning. I have always told myself that no matter how much I care, no matter how much I try--and I do care deeply and I do try earnestly--there will always be students I cannot reach. And you all know the ones of whom I am speaking: the student, for example, who consistently is late to class, who frequently

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falls asleep in class, who comes to class unprepared, and so on. These are the students who frequently "slip between the cracks" in my classes and, I suspect, in others. They are the ones it would be so easy to give up on. After all, we say, they are adults; they can choose how they want to spend their academic years. Well, this simply won't do.

It is easy, it is a great joy, to teach those who come to class every day, those who are always alert and always prepared--and we should never neglect them. But being a teacher is not about teaching only one type of learner and not the other. My contract did not say that I would teach only the conscientious and gifted, and no other. I did not become a teacher to teach only those who, if I am truthful, require only my guidance and encouragement to succeed and not those who require all my skills and patience and understanding if they are to succeed. It is our ethical and moral responsibility to educate all our students to the best of our ability so long as they are students at Western Carolina University.

So Terry and Bill, please do conduct dialogues in the fall based on faculty responsibility in student learning--and sign me up.

Gayle Miller, English

Bill and Terry, with all due respect, your diagnosis and prescribed treatment for what ails WCU student learning could not be more wrong. You make it clear that the central issue to you is that students do not spend enough time preparing for *classes*. I suggest the real central issue (if there is such a thing) associated with student learning stems from faculty insistence that student learning only takes place via courses. In fact, I submit that students spend far too much of their time preparing for classes and not enough in genuine learning activities. (excerpt; full text to follow on May 1)

John W. Moore, Communication and Theatre Arts