

Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "Cullowhee: A Place Apart From the Madding Crowd?," by April Lewandowski, 10/1/00

April Lewandowski's Forum piece suggests that Western, like Shakespeare's King Lear, hath ever but slenderly known itself. I'd add that our confusion goes beyond our sense of place.

•Since I came here (the same year Chancellor Bardo did), I've heard that we should "raise the bar" and become a National Merit school. Yet even as we struggle to overcome our credibility gap, we're talking seriously about eliminating majors like Philosophy and Physics that most help students succeed on the GRE, the LSAT, and GMAT--disciplines that define us as intellectually serious. Our peers at the North Carolina Faculty Assembly agree. "How can you call yourselves a University?" they ask, without the very majors we're thinking of cutting under program review. The Chancellor may believe the definition of a university is fluid, but we should give some weight to the derision of fellow educators, since their students influence ours.

•I've heard that science and humanities departments with few majors must lose positions. But other schools in our system keep those majors alive, despite shrinking enrollments, because they know that's how you attract the best full-time faculty to teach general education. We know that a strong liberal studies program is critical to our retention efforts. What faculty who had the power to go would stay here, knowing they could not teach advanced courses in the disciplines they've devoted their lives to?

•I've heard that we need to do more in general education, where our courses are taught by part-timers. But because we know our survival depends on keeping our majors, we must struggle to cover our major courses. And we've lost full-time faculty positions, not just because of our enrollment, but also because of an unprecedented five-year phased retirement scheme (two years longer than those of other schools in the UNC system) that puts a crippling burden of service on every remaining faculty member.

•We've heard we are the "most wired" so often that some think we're becoming a technical school. Yet we have an archaic and confusing web site that hasn't been redesigned since Dr. Bardo and I came here. We have no real college or department web support, no dial-up access, and few courses available on weekends. We can't compete with technical schools and community colleges, arguably "more wired," and we do little to appeal to the non-traditional students they attract.

•We've heard that our leaders do what "we" want them to do. But despite our emphasis on faculty governance, faculty are losing power. Non-teaching administrators vote on our faculty senate and dominate "our" proceedings. We're heading in the direction of many schools, hiring more and more adjunct instructors who, though well qualified, are vulnerable, over extended, and undervalued. As a body, our contact with students and our power to dissent will dwindle.

In the Middle Ages, students paid teachers directly, and teachers paid administrators an allowance to clean up their offices and do their dirty work. But "when we gavest them the rod," Lear's fool says, we "put'st down our own breeches." Now faculty--never more expendable--are eager to please and easier to blame. We even blame ourselves. We do more and give ourselves less credit. And we are "most loath to call our faults as they are named."
Mary Adams, English

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Thanks to April Lewandowski for her perspective on Cullowhee as a location. I've also explored with my Learning Community why they are here. The two most passionate answers they give are related to getting away from Mom to discover their personal identity and to not getting into App with friends (they plan to transfer next year). But most of the students have already found lots of new friends and fun things to do in Cullowhee and plan to stay here.

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Responses to "Cullowhee: A Place Apart," by April Lewandowski, 10/1/00

Isn't college about stretching, exploring, meeting new and different people, and having new and exciting experiences? While I agree with April that we ought to market WCU to students who are predisposed to liking Cullowhee, let's still try to attract those for whom liking Cullowhee will be a distinct challenge. I like the way Dr. Bardo emphasizes at Open Houses that not everyone will fit in here. Maybe we should rejoice that the unhappy student leaves after a year, despite how our retention rate looks. As Gael Graham pointed out in the last Forum response, personal decisions by 19-year-olds to leave WCU are valid no matter what faculty and administration think about the values involved.

I was reading the history of one of the private schools in these mountains and they stated their educational purpose was to provide an education close to home so the natives wouldn't have to disrupt their lives and values through exposure to a remote world. Perhaps this made sense when roads were rotten and the economy was lower than the pits. WCU started out with the same mission, and every time a local election comes up it is apparent that there are those who think WCU ought to be still serving only the locals, preferably with native faculty. But this would be a poor campus, offering poor education, if we never mixed in those with other, wider experiences and expectations. That means students as well as faculty and administrators. How can we tap what these young adults know to make life richer for all of us?

Sharon Jacques, Nursing

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So much of what April is saying rings true. But how can this emphasis be expected to take place when much of our biology program is simply being downsized? (we now have 6 full-time members compared to the 13 we had in 1995).

Dan Pittillo, Biology

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Bravo, April! As one who chose Cullowhee because of the location, I agree that we should tell prospective students more about where we are. And we should certainly do everything we can to ensure that students don't come here with false expectations.

In my 1993 doctoral dissertation, I argued (persuasively enough to get five signatures on the title page) that colleges that accurately portray their campus culture in their recruiting literature wind up with more-satisfied students and higher retention rates. We may be making progress in this regard. Western's current viewbook, "Power Your Mind," includes eight sentences about our location, up from zero sentences last year. The best two are a direct quotation from Ryan Taylor, a junior who was last year's state champion in downhill mountain biking. "Cullowhee has ideal conditions year-round for mountain biking," he says. "Some of the best trails in the country are right outside my door." The rest of the text could be problematic: "Go Ahead! Get your boots wet--riding the rapids, cleaning up a river, or testing the quality of the water. Western's location near the Great Smoky Mountains of North Carolina calls you into the great outdoors. Find yourself maintaining a trail, doing environmental research, or digging up the past alongside your professors. And did we mention? Our cool mountains are so hot some nine million people choose them every year as their vacation destination." I can't help but wonder if the writer knew that the lack of air conditioning in WCU's residence halls is a bone of contention among students.

Why don't we confess that the nearest mall is 50 miles away, that there's only one place in the county where you can get a burger at 2 a.m. and you need a car to get there, and that Sylva's three-plex won't show many of the movies they'd most like to see? Confess? Heck, let's revel in it. The best single recruiting piece I ever saw in 17 years of college PR work was an eight-minute video produced by Carleton College. About six of those minutes were devoted to how big and bad the mosquitoes are in Minnesota. But even better, why don't we let the students tell us what kind of place this is? They're the ones who know us best.

John Slater, Communication and Theatre Arts