

Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "The Faculty's Role in Student Retention," by Rob Routhieaux, 9/1/00

Rob, I agree with you completely.

Clarissa Fisher, Library

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While I agree with many (but not all) of Rob's suggestions for improving our teaching, I am profoundly dubious that faculty are the driving force behind WCU's poor retention rate or that we can be the ones to solve the problem. As I think back to my undergraduate years, I remember how utterly peripheral my professors were to my life and sense of well-being. In order of importance, I cared about my circle of friends (and especially my love life), my family back at home (this would have jumped to #1 had there been any problems at home), the subjects I was studying, and lastly and definitely least, my professors. I had some excellent professors and some lousy ones but it boggles my mind to think it ever would have occurred to me to leave the university because of some twit of a professor.

Last time I asked the administration if it had any idea why students left (this was last year), I was told no, they had no clue. What a surprise to discover this year that it's all our fault. Frank Prochaska said (last year) that WCU has tried to discover why students leave but keeps getting "bogus" answers like "My girlfriend is at another institution." Folks, that doesn't sound bogus to me. It sounds exactly like my priorities when I was 18 and 19.

If the administration continues to think our students are lying about why they leave (boy, there's a respectful attitude toward our students), then why don't they look into where students go and what they do after leaving WCU. If they are all transferring immediately to another school much like WCU, that means something different than if they sit at home and work in the service industry or join the military.

One last point: yes, there are some terrible teachers and some horrible teaching here at WCU. We could probably all name the culprits. Hopefully post-tenure review should embolden us to do so and to insist that these people shape up or ship out. By and large, however, I believe that the majority of professors—while not all using the same methods or style—are quite competent, and are not responsible for driving our students away.

Gael Graham, History

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While I agree with many of Rob's suggestions, I am concerned with the growing tendency to blame the faculty for WCU's freshman retention problem. Data from the Institutional Profiles, published annually by the UNC Board of Governors, sheds considerable light on the sources of our retention woes. The results are surprising.

Let's, as they say in the College of Business, "run the numbers." Among the nine non-minority universities, two factors are highly related to freshman retention--in a statistical sense. The first is the proportion of freshman ranked in the bottom half of their high school classes, which is inversely related to retention rates. Within the UNC system, the universities with the highest retention rates have the lowest proportion of freshmen ranked in the bottom half of their senior class. Conversely, the institutions with the lowest retention rates have the highest proportion of freshmen from the lower half of their senior class (for those with a penchant for statistics, the Pearson correlation coefficient between freshman retention rate and proportion of low ranking students at the nine schools is an impressive -.80). The proportion of low ranking students at WCU (about 37% in 1998) is far higher than at any other non-minority university in our system. For example, the proportion of bottom half

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freshmen at WCU in 1998 was about 25 times higher than that of Chapel Hill or UNC-A (each at 1.4%), nearly 5 times higher than at App State (8%), and over twice as high as ECU (16%). Surprisingly, despite a modest increase in the average SAT score of entering students, the proportion of WCU freshmen in the lower half of their senior class classes actually increased every year between 1994 and 1998.

A second variable which predicts retention differences among UNC schools is the average SAT score of the freshman class. As expected, the universities with the highest SAT scores (Chapel Hill and NC State) have the highest retention rates, those with mid-level SATs (App State and UNC-W) have moderate retention rates, and those with the lowest SATs have the lowest retention rates. I was not prepared, however, for the strength of this relationship. In 1998, the Pearson Correlation between retention rates at the various schools and mean freshman SAT was an astounding .90. This means that over 80% of the differences between retention rates among UNC schools is a function of the average SAT scores of the freshman class.

As Rob said, "Let's not kid ourselves." The fact is that retention among the non-minority UNC system schools is highly related to student variables and weakly, if at all, to faculty attributes. There is no reason to suspect that the faculty at WCU are any less freshman-friendly than our colleagues at UNC-A or East Carolina. And there is every reason to think that WCU provides a more supportive educational environment than Chapel Hill and NC State. The Research I schools have highest retention rates in the state while probably at the same time having the fewest faculty who take daily attendance, the lowest proportion of teachers who know their students' names, and the highest number of freshman classes taught by graduate students for whom English is a second language.

This is not to suggest that we can blow off our low retention rates. Many of Rob's suggestions are on the mark—our best professors should teach freshman courses and we do have a responsibility to make our courses rigorous and engaging. I take issue, however, with the contention that, as a group, our freshmen leave because of faculty inadequacies. Finger pointing and quick fix solutions will not cure a complex problem.

Hal Herzog, Psychology

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Chancellor Bardo's opening faculty address this fall alluded to the faculty's responsibility for the low student retention rates at Western and, lo and behold, the first Faculty Forum of this semester not only supports that premise but goes a step further in saying that we are the primary cause of low retention. This brings up a far more interesting issue than student retention itself. Why is Western attracting so many low-quality, uncaring faculty? As the Chancellor noted, the student retention rates at Western have been significantly low for at least the past 26 years. If these low retention rates are mostly caused by poor faculty, it appears that Western has been a historical Mecca for poor faculty. What's causing this? Is it the mountain scenery that attracts us? Perhaps it's the low cost of living or the good working conditions. I imagine the retention rates at schools like NC State and Chapel Hill are fairly high. Maybe we should take seminars from these "more caring faculty" so we can learn how better to retain students.

Let's face it. Across the board, faculty at the various UNC institutions do not significantly differ in the way that they care about students. Should we be concerned about caring more about our students? Of course we should. But let's not delude ourselves into thinking that we are the primary cause of the low retention rates any more than an absence of bars is. By the way, J. Edwards now sells beer, wine and hard liquor drinks, so we should see those retention rates start to skyrocket any day now.

Kurt Vandervoort, Chemistry and Physics

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Rob Routhieaux's description of the elements of good teaching is right on the mark. However, I know of no data that support his claim that good teaching will increase student retention. Also, I know of no data that support the corollary claim that bad teaching is a cause of student attrition. When we look at the data about retention we see that student factors, rather than faculty factors, are the chief determinants of student retention. Schools that attract better prepared and more highly motivated students retain students at higher rates than schools that attract large numbers of students who are neither prepared for college nor interested in engaging in academic undertakings.

So, what is the member of the faculty who is troubled by WCU's low retention rate to do?

One response to the "crisis" in student retention is to blame the victims—our unprepared and unmotivated students. Another response is to heap scorn on the administration for making us, the faculty, scapegoats for our low retention rate. A third response is to make a genuine effort to foster the kind of intellectual climate at WCU that we value and that stimulated us during our own undergraduate careers. Can we do this by "raising the bar?" The evidence thus far suggests that raising the bar has little or no direct effect on retention, but it seems to me that it produces more interesting teaching opportunities for faculty and more interesting learning opportunities for students.

Are learning communities the solution? When learning communities are owned and operated by faculty who are adequately supported, it appears that they can motivate many unprepared students to work to stay in school. The key is to establish conditions that allow faculty to create the right kinds of learning communities. WCU is doing this better than it did two years ago, but not as well as it could or as it will. Is low retention simply a marketing problem? An effective leader of a college or university must be skilled at doing whatever good marketers do, but marketing magic alone is not sufficient to attract good students who want to be in college.

Rob Routhieaux's suggestions won't directly affect our retention rate. But if enough of us acted as he suggests we should, we could make changes in the climate at WCU that, over time, would make WCU more attractive to the kinds of students we value, those who are prepared for college and interested in learning.

John Habel, Psychology

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So there I was, striding across campus between buildings, between meetings. Ahead of me was Tom Canepa, the Associate Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Management himself, walking with a cellular phone to his ear. I caught up, slowed my gait to match his and Tom explained in a quiet voice, as he continued walking with cell to ear, that he didn't have time to listen to all his voice mail when he's in his office so he estimated that this was a good use of the 8 minutes it took him to walk from the White House to McKee. The retention problem is about **TIME**.

When staff, faculty, and administrators don't have time to stroll across campus and at the same time breathe, reflect, unwind, observe, greet, or chat, something's terribly wrong. I kept my slowed pace and Tom pocketed his cell phone. The enjoyable conversation that ensued revealed our similar observations about first year students who have difficulty being "present" in class due to their divided and distracted attention.

Chris Gunn, Counseling & Psychological Services