

Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "The Culture of Silence," by Mary Jean Ronan Herzog, 9/1/97

I would like to respond to Mary Jean Herzog's call for faculty at all levels to speak out and break the sounds of silence at WCU. I think it's a great idea. I even have some confidence that the current administration (particularly since the most recent changes) would really accept and encourage such a thing.

I've always believed in speaking out. I was as idealistic and iconoclastic as any young faculty member when I came here in the late '60's. I took academic freedom for granted and I "told it like I saw it." However, I have found that academic freedom is only a limited shield against those with power over your conditions of employment. In light of my experience, I think anyone who is thinking about free expression here should choose their ground carefully and make sure the cause is worth the sacrifice. Because there is a sacrifice.

I was among the "petitioners" in 1974. Though untenured, I kept my job (though I received tenure only on appeal), but I saw three of my untenured colleagues lose theirs. Numerous department heads, and even a Dean, abandoned positions of responsibility in protest. None of them were ever reinstated, and several were overtly persecuted after they rejoined the faculty rank-and-file (low raises, undesirable teaching assignments, verbal abuse by the department head and his favorites, etc.).

I didn't stop speaking out. I was a slow learner, I guess, and it took a while before the cumulative effect of administrative displeasure became apparent; I didn't know I was being hurt. I testified on behalf of a colleague before the Hearing Committee and subsequently got reamed out for it by an enraged (and slightly intoxicated) Dean in front of my colleagues and their families at a picnic. That did get my attention. And his attitude toward me was taken up by my department head and has been maintained and developed by a succession of them ever since.

The tangible effects of administrative displeasure and its enduring consequences have been these: I have been on the no-merit-raise, no-promotion track ever since, in spite of changes in administration and regardless of good (or bad) teaching evaluations, publications, or exceptional departmental or university service activities. I've often wondered whether I'm really that bad, but I look around at my better-rewarded colleagues, and I don't think that's it. I'm disappointed and somewhat discouraged--burned out, perhaps--but I'm still working on improving my teaching, helping grad students, initiating new research, and, though I no longer expect any reward for it, I still do more service than I really have time for. I've never given my job less than 100%, and I think I'm really good at it.

But there are some forms of service I will not do. I will not serve on Grievance or Hearing Committees, for the reasons specified by Dr. Herzog. Been there, done that. No joy. There's conflict of interest inherent in the way those committees are set up, and if the committee rules against an administrator, the administration can and will undercut the decision while letting you know that they are displeased. At least, that's how it was in the '80's and early '90's. And I have reason to know how a high administrator's displeasure expresses itself.

Maybe it's all different now. I'm hopeful, but consider the source: I've thought so before and I've been wrong. My plans for the earliest possible retirement consistent with full benefits are on hold while I wait to see how this episode of the ongoing revolution shakes out. But for those who believe that academic freedom is an absolute, for those considering speaking out like free citizens of a direct Athenian democracy, and particularly for those who have more to lose than just the last few years of a not-particularly-satisfying academic career, I would quote the moral of one of James Thurber's Fables For Our Time, "The Ladybird and the Butterfly": "She who would go unarmed in paradise should first be sure that's where she is."

name withheld by request

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I agree with Mary Jean Herzog and would like to urge that we hold a broadly based meeting (involving faculty, administrators, and students) on the proposed requirement that students purchase their own computers. This proposal has not been discussed at all except in select groups (and the selection process is unclear to me, based on what I read in the *Western Carolinian*). If, as rumor has it, this proposal is to be implemented as early as next year, we need time to discuss the issue and its ramifications more fully than has been the case to date. Although this is a prime "faculty governance" issue, an informal poll of my students indicates that many of them have concerns and suggestions that also ought to be heard.

Gael Graham, History

In response to Mary Jean Herzog's thoughtful Faculty Forum piece, I would like to add that Department Heads, being neither fish nor fowl, also lack a voice in the university. "Department Head Workshops" scheduled once or twice a semester by the administration are used for disseminating information. There is not much dialogue or interaction. To gain the opportunity for communication among peers, many heads are meeting at the UClub on a regular basis to identify mutual problems and discuss potential solutions. Appropriate administrators are invited to share their perspectives at selected meetings. Such informal mechanisms are open to all faculty and could contribute much to developing a faculty agenda to present to administration.

Sharon Jacques, Nursing

An excellent piece, but I wonder if there are still contextual barriers to breaking Mary Jean's "culture of silence?"

- Are administrators willing to really be academic "first among equals?" Some administrators have laughed at faculty members who suggested, in committee meetings, that pervasive curriculum issues be addressed on their academic merits instead of administrative considerations. Have you ever noticed that curriculum on this campus is a political matter more than an academic matter?

- Are administrators willing to really foster faculty productivity and quality? Some administrators do not make hard decisions about resource allocation but instead advise faculty members to apply for a plethora of "small internal grants." Have you ever noticed how many times we are forced to compete with each other for the fundamental tools of our trade (a phenomenon which makes beggars of us and creates more losers than winners)?

- Do administrators really believe they exist to support faculty activities--teaching, research, and service? Some administrators apparently function under the philosophy that the faculty exists to support them. Have you ever noticed how many times we perform administrative and support services work for administrators (and how many times our reward for good work is more work)?

If there ever was an example of a dog chasing its tail, it's a faculty attempting to break a culture of silence when the context is not conducive to doing so.

Walt Foegelle, Health Sciences

Mary Jean has exposed one of the deepest roots of WCU's oak tree of resistance to change. During my 17 years here, I have heard lots of faculty voices--mostly whispers in safe havens such as the parking lot or the bathroom--griping about how we go through the motions of planning, discussing issues, and proposing new ways of doing things, only to find that, after all the smoke clears, nothing of significance is different. But these voices seldom surface in public forums. In spite of increasing retirements and a large influx of new faculty, we have managed to perpetuate a culture of silence.

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It's gonna take an army of sharp-toothed beavers--to chop down this tree. Simply urging our pre-tenured colleagues to "speak your mind" or "voice your opinion" in the spirit of academic freedom, with no regard for the consequences, may not be the most appealing solution to someone who is looking forward with trepidation to a tenure decision. Replacing administrators won't do it because we've recently done that at many levels. The problem, like a long, fat, poison ivy vine, seems to be entwined around the system. But that doesn't mean we must throw up our hands in despair. Now that MJ has highlighted the problem, perhaps we can begin to nibble away at the bark at least. Here are a few suggestions, for starters:

- Identify someone to serve as an "Academic Freedom Activist" (or ombudsperson, or agent, or some other appropriate title). This person (NOT a committee) would simply receive comments, questions, complaints, etc. from anyone who feels at risk of recrimination and would relay the sentiments anonymously to appropriate parties.

- Expand the role of faculty senators to include seeking out, articulating, and otherwise representing dissenting opinions and minority viewpoints. In Senate proceedings, especially where debatable issues are decided, include a written record of minority opinions and make it clear that such constructive disagreement is valued.

- Develop a written statement about academic freedom and the value of free speech and open dialogue and circulate it for endorsement by all faculty and administrators.

- Promote a grassroots movement among senior faculty to build a "bubble of support" around junior colleagues in department and college meetings. Such support might include routinely inviting thoughts and opinions before adjourning a meeting, and frequently mentioning that open, honest disagreement and airing of different opinions is respected and beneficial.

I think most people on this campus would enjoy a culture that thrives on a vigorous exchange of ideas and considered opinions. Rather than grouching about the problem, let's all give some thought to practical steps toward a more vibrant campus climate.

Ben Ward, Faculty Center

In calling our attention to a "culture of silence," Mary Jean Herzog has given us much to think about. Discussions in faculty meetings at the college and university level have a great deal of merit in a university community. Hopefully we will move forward in this direction.

At various times in the past there were "sanctions" for speaking out, but despite this faculty spoke out anyway on important academic issues and some lost salary advances as well as jobs. This period of "long ago" still lives in stories and myths. In any institution, including universities, those who challenge the status quo will not always be appreciated but as faculty it is not only our obligation to speak out in controversial areas but the primary reason faculty are granted tenure. Despite institutional protections, does it come down to courage? I have known so many WCU faculty members with courage and sometimes even in silence they did the courageous thing. As I think of WCU faculty who have retired, died on the job, or been here for many years, I see in our culture a certain stubborn legacy of dissent and speaking out at the appropriate times. This is counterbalanced by a WCU element of civic courtesy of listening and weighing opposing positions. This legacy, which includes the role of those "paying the price" for speaking out, is an important element that sustains us as we build toward the future.

Gordon Mercer, Political Science and Public Affairs