

Building a Sense of Community at WCU

How often have you had a student drop-by during office hours simply to chat? When was the last time you talked to a student in a setting other than the classroom? How many faculty do you know who are comfortable eating lunch with their undergraduate students? If you answer in the negative, you should know that it hasn't always been like this. I have fond memories of the hole-in-the-wall called the Townhouse (the present-day Subway). The Townhouse was the unofficial community center for WCU and the site of many faculty-student conversations over coffee or lunch. You may not share my nostalgia, but I believe the Townhouse had not been replaced in the present-day WCU and that our sense of community has deteriorated rather than improved since those Townhouse days.

I also believe that a sense of community is important in a university because teaching and learning thrive on stimulating conversation outside the classroom. You may talk occasionally to some of your students outside of class, maybe even to some of the other faculty, but that by itself does not make WCU an academic community where learning is vibrantly shared as a common possession and a form of enjoyment. In his address to the General Faculty last August, Chancellor Bardo observed that "most students who leave universities, leave for social reasons. . .[and] students stay in universities when. . .they feel that they are accepted, valued, and believed in. . . .If they feel isolated and alone, they will find somewhere else to go to school or not go at all." According to the university mission statement, teaching and learning constitute the central mission at WCU but teaching and learning will only enliven the heart of an academic community when what goes on outside the classroom is as essential to a student's development as what goes on inside the classroom. It is the life outside of the classroom that will lead a student to either stay at WCU or leave it.

So how do you build a university community focused on learning that includes both students and faculty and expands beyond the boundaries of the classroom? I think a sense of community can develop through a common vision of learning as a process of discovery that essentially forces itself beyond the classroom. If we want to stimulate real learning in our students, we need to encourage them to discover knowledge for themselves and to understand that new insights are meaningless unless they are shared.

The Undergraduate Research Conference, for example, is certainly a step in the right direction in this matter, but could it not go farther to help create a stronger sense of community on campus? How about combining the Undergraduate Research Conference with the Graduate Student Research Symposium and designating a day in the spring when all classes are canceled and campus activities are genuinely focused on these presentations? At our research conferences

students are actively engaged in learning through discovery. Why not create an all-inclusive Student Research Conference with a genuinely high profile so that students could see that learning is unequivocally valued at WCU and that their teachers as well as their fellow students are genuinely interested in what they have discovered. If a Student Research Conference became a serious and respected event at WCU, student presenters would become models for other students, and faculty in turn would become more genuine facilitators in student learning outside the classroom.

A sense of community could also develop with communication across disciplines emphasizing how each discipline fits into the whole of society. If we want to stimulate a respect for real learning in our students, we need to demonstrate that ideas do not have boundaries. Interdepartmental seminars could show faculty sharing their disciplinary perspectives and the students might better understand connections between the diverse majors on campus. A series of seminars could be initiated to focus on a yearly topic. A different department could host the seminar each month and we could start with an environmental topic in light of the our new endowed professorship. For example, what do environmental issues look like from the perspective of sociology, economics, literature, industry, history, education, biology, nursing, and anthropology? The high visibility of such interdepartmental conversations would be living proof that the university is not a collection of isolated domains, which is what departments and the typical schedule of classes now conveys.

A sense of community could also develop with activities that stress the relevance of our world at WCU to the local community and beyond. If we want to stimulate a respect for learning in our students, we need to help them see the value of ideas in the context of everyday life. Alumni Day could involve a day of activities during which each department recognizes the success of former students by inviting them back to interact with current students. We have a Career Day which allows seniors to interview with potential employers, but students need to know what faces them in their chosen profession well before their final year of study. And who are they more likely to listen to than former students?

A sense of community can obviously not develop without communication. And certainly technology has possibilities for creating a virtual community on campus, but it will require more than equipping students and faculty with computers. Faculty will have to devote time and energy to using technology not only for instruction but for communication with students outside of class. Existing opportunities for electronic communication include 38 WCU newsgroups, but in browsing through the newsgroups, I found only four with over 10 comments during a two month period and these were primarily connected to a specific course. A message from a student on one of these newsgroups sums up the current use of this medium well: "hee hee hee. Is it just me or does it seem a little ironic that the only posts here in wcu.rec.weekends have nothing to do with recreation at WCU or the weekends? Not that anyone seems to read these newsgroups anyway." But communication doesn't have to be stimulated only by computers. How about by campus geography? A university square could provide a place for faculty and students to feel comfortable in casual conversation. Maybe we could block off traffic on University drive from Reid Gym (corner of Camp Lab Rd.) to the road past the stadium (corner of Forest Hills Dr.) and create a larger square around the UC and Dodson Cafeteria. Maybe we could recreate the comfortable and inviting atmosphere of the old Townhouse.

An academic community requires constant attention and commitment. For those of you working to broaden the doors of communication with students, keep the faith because whatever steps we take to make Western more inviting to students, we will have to address the issue of community sooner or later. Otherwise, what's the point of having students on campus; we might as well do all our classes on the web.

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