

Playing WCU's Ace Card: Stronger Ties To The Region?

As we grapple together with Western's most immediate challenges--enhancing the public's perception of the quality of our programs and increasing the size of our enrollment pool--it might be instructive to explore how closer regional ties can help us. There is growing evidence that when public, regional universities such as WCU aspire to grow in size and quality, an essential first step is to become more highly valued by the citizens in their locale. Two examples--George Mason and East Carolina--illustrate this hypothesis.

In the 1970s, George Mason was a young, commuter institution in the Fairfax suburbs of the District of Columbia. It lacked a distinctive identity until it adopted a clear strategic plan that called for the university to tackle some of the most pressing learning and service needs of Northern Virginia. A public radio station was founded to fill an important cultural niche. Evening degree programs, including a law degree for working persons, were established at convenient locations. Courses by cable television were pioneered to increase access to instruction. Faculty were encouraged to become involved in civic activities, and an applied research unit was created to help apply the expertise of faculty and staff members to problems in the region. Convenient access and proactive service to citizens of all ages in the region led to significant increases in enrollments and enhanced political/budgetary support. The latter was illustrated graphically during a tight budget year in the mid-1980s when the only new faculty positions authorized statewide by the legislature were at George Mason.

At East Carolina, a strong regional identity had been that institution's greatest asset over the years as it consciously positioned itself as THE university for underserved eastern North Carolina. The tactic's success was illustrated dramatically by the against-all-odds legislative decision to establish a medical school on the Greenville campus in the 1970s. With a publicly-supported medical school in Chapel Hill and private medical schools receiving state funds for NC students in Durham and Winston Salem, no logical argument was put forth to create a fourth school unless it were to be in Charlotte. But ECU captured the support of influentials from Raleigh eastward and their will eventually prevailed. Regional support was galvanized to create the ECU School of Medicine and provide family practice medical doctors to the small communities in eastern NC.

I call up these examples to illustrate the power of regional loyalty for public universities that do not enjoy statewide or national identities. UNC-Chapel Hill can take for granted its specific obligations within the Triangle area and still maintain its statewide credibility. For institutions such as WCU, however, strong regional loyalties are essential. George Mason parlayed its regional support to compete for international recognition in economics and creative writing. One doubts that such recognitions could have occurred if the university had lacked regional coalitions.

My argument is that WCU can strengthen its position of influence by paying more attention to the learning and service needs of the twenty-some counties in western North Carolina. This will not require us to bend our standards or to become anything other than a responsive institution of higher learning. It also does not mean that all of our attention should be focused locally. It does mean that we make the most of local assets and opportunities; that we identify with the unique opportunities the region offers for teaching, research and service; and that we take pride in these endeavors. Our aspiration should be to become indispensable first to this region--and then, progressively, to the state and beyond.

How to proceed? Certainly, a successful regional strategy should engage the best thinking of our faculty, staff, and regional audiences and include an understanding that the strategy will be evolutionary, changing with emerging needs and opportunities. I would hope that such a conversation can begin immediately. In the meantime, here are some thoughts on the matter that have occurred to me through observations and conversations during the past year.

Define our campus as the region

WCU is blessed with three specific sites at which resident credit instruction can be offered: Cullowhee, Cherokee, and Asheville. We may be the only institution east of the Mississippi with a campus on an Indian Reservation, and Asheville has emerged as one of the nation's most livable cities. Let's tout these assets by defining WCU as a diverse, three-campus university. At the same time, let's take better advantage of opportunities offered at these three sites. Asheville is the region's urban hub, a source of adult students in our graduate and technical undergraduate programs. Let's commit to meeting the specific needs of adult students in Asheville. This means sensing the pulse of the adult market and shaping our programs accordingly. Year-round instruction with shorter, more intense courses? Weekend courses? More independent learning? Closer ties with employers? We must be open to these and other changes. Earning the role as Asheville's graduate school of choice is a worthy objective and could bring many rewards. Ditto for paying more attention to opportunities in Cherokee, where we might forge stronger ties to the Eastern Band and open up more new learning options for our non-Indian students.

Embrace the Region as an Artifact for Learning

The Southern Appalachians reflect a unique cultural and natural history. Have we drawn upon these assets sufficiently to enrich our instruction and scholarship? Would we attract more focused students if we bundled together some of our smaller programs into multi-disciplinary majors in environmental stewardship, rural sustainable development, and eco-tourism management? This approach need not exclude more traditional offerings. Rather, it could assure that WCU takes appropriate advantage of its close-at-hand resources. Have we exploited the benefits of service learning, student internships, and cooperative education? These activities, carefully planned and supervised, immerse students in hands-on learning while breaking down town and gown barriers.

Adopt Regional Issues and Problems for Research

As a provider of technical assistance, WCU's Mountain Resources Center is the envy of other regional universities seeking to address local needs through applied research. For many businesses, governments, and service agencies, the MRC is their primary connection with WCU. The irony is that we are not taking full advantage of the MRC as a university-wide resource. Too few faculty and their academic departments perceive the MRC as a university broker for research and consultation. Student involvement in MRC's regional activity is serendipitous rather than intentional. If the MRC were strategically drawn into the academic mainstream, it could become the logical broker for faculty and student participation in the region. The MRC, with its hard-won network of business, industry, non-profit and service contacts, may be our greatest asset for bonding the university and the region. No other public university in NC, except the land grant schools (NC, A&T, and NCSU), has a technical assistance outreach arm similar to the MRC. The challenge is to galvanize its potential as a university-wide resource broker.

These reflections are formative, not definitive. The challenge for WCU, it seems to me, is to construct a strategy for improved public support. For a regional institution, public support begins close to home and then moves outward. First, we prove our value to the neighbors.

Oak Winters, Dean of Continuing Education and Summer School

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