



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

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Status, Scholarship, and Freedom at State Comprehensive Universities

WCU is one of the country's 300+ state comprehensive universities (SCUs). It is easier to describe SCUs by what they are not than by what they are. SCUs are not national in scope, not selective in admissions, not research extensive, and not focused on a liberal education. A more positive characterization is that SCUs are regional, provide access to higher education, are teaching institutions, and prepare most students for jobs.

In each of the contrasts in the lists above, the positively stated descriptor is lower in status, and SCUs and their faculty members frequently struggle with issues of status. Occasionally a SCU will manage to move up the status hierarchy by becoming more national, more selective, or more oriented to producing basic research. Likewise, a few faculty members may gain status in their disciplines by teaching less, doing more grant-funded research, and being more cosmopolitan (spending less time on campus dealing with local issues). The reality, however, is that few SCUs will ever be major research universities (although some have become mediocre research university wannabes) and relatively few SCU faculty members will become prestigious researchers (a recent study documented that it takes 20 SCU faculty members to produce the same number of scholarly articles per year as the average faculty member at a research university). I believe it is time for SCUs and their faculty members to opt out of the status game, a game we cannot win. Doing so can free us to redefine our work in ways that could allow us to better serve our regions, our students, and even our disciplines.

What are the implications of giving up the quest for status? First, SCUs could remain places where a wide range of students can gain access to higher education. Democratic openness has always been an important feature of SCUs. Historically, SCUs deal with students who are less-than-well-prepared and with well-prepared students who cannot afford a more elite education. These roles are among the SCU's reason for being. Recognizing this can help keep faculty members from expecting less of students. The cures for student unpreparedness and for student failure are balancing challenge with support rather than lowering standards, attributing failure to lack of student effort or inadequate teaching rather than to a lack of student ability. Status-seeking elitists should know that admissions selectivity does not correlate with the degree to which students at an institution are actively engaged in learning.

Abandoning the quest for status could allow us at SCUs to celebrate our role in preparing students for work. Recent research shows that all colleges and universities have

moved toward more emphasis on "vocationalism." Some faculty members are uncomfortable with this change. Yet SCUs historically have targeted their programs to students who were much more likely to join the workforce after graduation than to immediately attend graduate schools. During the mid-twentieth century transition from teachers colleges to state colleges, education programs were the target of anti-vocationalism. At many SCUs today, the targets are likely to be sport management, health sciences, or construction management. A strong orientation toward preparation for work is in the history and nature of the SCUs. Those of us who tend toward anti-vocationalism need to appreciate that many applied problems can and do require intellectual effort equal to that involved in the classical liberal arts education. At the same time, the champions of the traditional disciplines need to act as campus-wide citizens to ensure that students in all programs are truly educated, not merely trained.

Good and even great teaching provides no national or disciplinary stature. There is no labor market for good teachers that compares to the market for prestigious researchers. Ignoring status allows us to accept that teaching comes first at SCUs. Coming first will mean that faculty members will spend more time on teaching than on anything else. It means teaching that is perceived to be effective will be supported and rewarded. Teaching innovations, even risky ones that fail, will be considered worthwhile. An increase in the frequency of good teaching on campus will not gain the institution status, but it will surely enhance its reputation.

Faculty members at SCUs will do more than teach. Because of concerns about status, traditional research and publication still carries the most weight in faculty evaluations. Abandoning status-seeking frees the SCUs to adopt some form of Boyer's expanded view of scholarship to set a more flexible set of expectations. Certainly there is always room for traditional basic research, especially if it involves students. Broader arenas for an expanded definition of scholarship include applied research and providing scholarly expertise in consulting with agencies, businesses, and community organizations on social, cultural, political, and economic issues. Most of this work is unlikely to lead to traditional forms of peer-reviewed publication, but when such work is done in a scholarly way it should be recognized and rewarded as scholarly activity. Similarly, institutional service that involves a genuine application of disciplinary expertise rather than carrying out simple chores should also be recognized and rewarded. Perhaps most important, saying that teaching comes first at SCUs is saying that teaching is a legitimate and valued source of scholarly activity. What is now called the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) provides a mechanism for faculty involvement that mirrors traditional research and publication activities. At SCUs, teaching innovations, demonstrations of student learning, and the assessment of teaching and learning should all "count" as faculty scholarship.

We have the freedom to redefine teaching, research and service and to do so in ways that will better serve our constituents. We may find that the SCU can be the best place to work for the well-rounded teacher-scholar.

Bruce Henderson, Psychology

Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "Status, Scholarship, and Freedom at State Comprehensive Universities" by Bruce Henderson, 12/1/05

An exSCUse for mediocrity

In Bruce Henderson's Faculty Forum piece from December 1st, the goal of achieving excellence in scholarly pursuits was attacked under the guise of that's-not-what-State-Comprehensive-Universities-are-about. He seems bitter about something. I, for one, am numb from the constant criticism I hear from senior peers demeaning research, intellectual interests, and professional development. We always hear the same fear about becoming a Research I institution. What nonsense! These critics decry scholarly activities as a distraction to teaching, when, in fact, they augment, inspire, and validate the learning experience in the classroom. After all, the best learners should be the instructors; interested students are facilitated and enriched by such eager teachers. While SoTL, workshops, listserver groups, etc., can aid in honing teaching skills and strategies, the best teachers are more often than not those who have innate abilities and insights and who challenge students to follow their teachers in sometimes unconventional ways—not to simply discuss doing the same.

All the points raised about what Bruce feels we should be don't make sense in a shrinking world full of ever-changing challenges. We should not be preparing our students for life in Cullowhee alone. Yes, we want more people to find jobs after their university experience, but so do Asheville-Buncombe Technical and Southwestern Community Colleges. We simply have a campus culture enamored with high technology (though, perhaps not an understanding of it), with an unhealthy taste for political strategizing for federal pork and corporate perks and with a selective set of beliefs dictated from the highest office.

WCU can excel in teaching, research, and service. Just keep those who would suggest all we should do is teach and train students only for specific jobs to stay out of the way of the rest of us who are preparing students for life. This includes developing the intellectual and critical thinking skills required for fulfillment and any number of careers that our students may *choose* to excel in. "Status" be damned, excellence be praised.

Anonymous, AKA, a tenure track professor with excellent teaching evaluations and successful students, and who is responsible for maintaining scholarly productivity because these are the things I was told WCU wanted.

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First of all, Bruce, thank you for writing the strong essay for this month's Faculty Forum. I hope it will evoke many responses and a good conversation regarding Western's nature, role, and meaning as a university.

I have come across SCUs that have a stated aspiration of being the best or one of the premier SCUs in the country, and I think I have heard a goal for Western Carolina becoming a "national comprehensive university." If those desires are more than material for the university's glossy publications, what could this mean and how could it happen, if it could?

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When I came to Western and the Faculty Center, I decided that SoTL could be the foundation/canopy for our whole professional faculty development program in teaching, learning, and research. It would be a sustained focus upon Western's central mission. After four years, the idea seems plausible and possible. An SCU can develop a unique reputation among all classifications of colleges and universities based upon authentic indicators, a working reputation based upon becoming and being "a sustainable culture of inquiry about teaching" (Maki). Such an academic community can result from an SCU integrating the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) into its culture and becoming a state, regional, and national leader in SoTL. Such a culture would emphasize open conversations and work about teaching and learning, making the results of such work public, applying the results of research about teaching to courses and work with students, assessing the results for the purpose of continuous improvement, disseminating what has been learned about student learning among colleagues and the culture as a whole, and building up a growing body of knowledge and wisdom about teaching and learning in the disciplines and across the disciplines, regardless of teaching methods or the stage of one's academic career.

Based upon a multi-faceted integration of SoTL over the last several years, facilitated by the Coulter Faculty Center, Western is becoming a benchmark university for such SoTL integration. And that growth has essentially been a guided, grass-roots process that speaks very, very highly of many of our faculty who have become so involved in this SoTL-based faculty development program for teaching, learning, and research, contrary to the idea sometimes presented that faculty are "too busy" to give serious time, energy, and attention to continuous and collaborative work with colleagues to improve student learning. My view is that, when even genuinely busy, stretched faculty enjoy working with colleagues for improving teaching and learning and find the experience worthwhile, applicable, and personally rewarding. We find time to do what we consider important. For we are here to not only teach but to promote, create, and guide students into real learning opportunities and experiences. That is why so many of Western's best and busiest faculty have become so involved the Center's program. Such work can revitalize or place in fresh focus why many of us became teachers in the first place. Research universities have more funding, but they do not necessarily have more awareness, knowledge, commitment, vision, wisdom, and perseverance regarding why and how SoTL can transform the academic culture as a whole and the teaching of individual faculty in particular.

Teaching is not enough and teaching is nothing if it does not lead to higher-order, creative and critical thinking and learning among students. SoTL and a strong Faculty Center to advocate for it may simply be the best way to improve student learning for individual faculty and for the university as a whole.

If I were to bring together your essay and my response discussed here, I would say that with a continued, ever-increasing level and depth of faculty participation in our SoTL-based program and with strong support from university leadership, Western could become a "Learning University" where everyone (students, faculty, staff, administrators) reconceives of her or his work in terms of how it can promote a sustainable culture for significant student learning. Such an intentional trajectory could lead to Western being an epitome of an SCU by furthering all the goals you mention: regional development, democratic access to higher education, centrality of teaching for student learning, and preparing students for employment and civic responsibilities. In addition, such an SCU would give strong support to faculty research: disciplinary research can enliven teaching and one's professional career, and research about teaching and learning (SoTL) can lead directly to assessing and improving student learning.

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Through the SoTL at Western initiative (<http://www.wcu.edu/SoTL/>) and its complex system of roots, trunks, and branches, Western is becoming fairly well-known nationally and internationally for its SoTL focus, work, and results, perhaps much more recognized than some people at Western may realize.

Western has been steadily moving to the forefront regionally and nationally in integrating SoTL into the academic culture and understanding that SoTL, facilitated by the Faculty Center, is perhaps the most direct, effective way to improve student learning in any discipline, across various teaching methods, from the newest faculty to the most senior, and to lay the foundation for the university to become a "Learning University." For such an SCU, this recognition would be both remarkable and simply living up whole-heartedly to its mission. To be a faculty member at such an SCU could mean being at the "best place to work for the well-rounded teacher-scholar."

Such an SCU would not make status its goal but instead would be free to be an inquiry-based, learning-laden academic culture, day by day.

Alan Altany, Philosophy and Coulter Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

I was sadly disappointed by Bruce Henderson's piece in the recent Faculty Forum. The implication that we cannot possibly succeed, and therefore must abandon, some of the basic values of a university is shocking. What impression must this piece of writing have left on our first year faculty? Nothing can be more deflating than telling someone it is not even worth trying to achieve the goals laid out for them during the hiring process and during faculty orientation. New faculty are struggling with numerous responsibilities; suggesting they simply drop part of the core values of a university should repulse them. I certainly hope it does not encourage them to seek work elsewhere.

We at WCU must ensure that an environment aimed at teaching, research, and service is maintained on campus. Student participation in faculty research is an essential component of any curriculum. In the Biology department we cannot envision our students leaving this university without research experience. The student's ability to continue his/her education or to find employment is dependent on this very experience. Performing research is not a status issue; it is an issue of remaining up to date in your area, of bringing the energy and enthusiasm gained from research into the classroom, and of helping students become better prepared for their future careers.

Please remember: this is Western Carolina University not Western Carolina Community College. Community colleges perform an admirable, invaluable role in the education system in the state of North Carolina but their role is not ours and neither should we strive to become equal.

Sabine Rundle, Biology

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Pawn Takes Queen

Scholars in entrepreneurship have been observing for decades that pawns can, and do, take queens. We know this to be impossible in chess, but we also know that bumblebees cannot fly. It doesn't just happen; creative destructionism, the heart of entrepreneurship, is seated in the human mind, that marvelous instrument that knows no boundaries and recognizes no limitations. Paradigm shifts lay low the giants of industry, but these shifts are created by entrepreneurs who disdain to play to the established world. Huge firms concentrate on giving the public what it wants; these firms hone, refine,

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incrementally tweak their offerings, and serve the general good quite well. Entrepreneurs recognize that the public can't know what it wants until an entrepreneur shows them; thus, new industries are created, and the old are swept away. Of course, the giants follow into the newly uncharted lands but only when the maps are clear. By that time, the entrepreneurs have moved on to create new opportunities. It is not the recognition of an opportunity that characterizes an entrepreneur; it is the creation of an opportunity. We aren't trying to teach our students the skills to find a job; we are trying to teach them how to change the world. To do that, we can never allow negativism to enter the classroom.

Even if we never achieve the breakthrough which will sow the winds of a new paradigm, we can still create real wealth for ourselves and our families. We teach our students that they CAN compete with WalMart. You see, a giant firm requires a giant market. Firms like WalMart use a skimming strategy: they provide goods and services that appeal to the great mass of the market; some observers use the 80% rule to suggest that a giant cannot be interested in any offering that does not appeal to 80% of the market. That leaves 20% of the market which is never courted or touched by the mass of companies, and this is the proving ground of the niche market. Far more wealth potential exists in the niche market than in the broader market, not just because of the reduced competition but because attacking the niche can be done in a much less costly fashion and the barriers to entry are low. Again, having the courage to challenge the giant requires us to build self confidence in the budding entrepreneurial mind and we can permit no whiff of negativism.

No giant university can be entrepreneurial because of the same principles that prevent a giant corporation from pursuing the niche or taking the risk to enter uncharted waters. Here, as in business, innovation is seeded in the small, the agile, the bold, and the confident. Only a small university can embrace these characteristics; but, it must choose to do so. Western can make that choice.

Can we compete with the WalMarts of the university world? Why would we want to? Life is in the journey, as the end is always certain. If we might paraphrase Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, the meaning may be more clear. Jeff invested his life savings (and those of his parents, by the way) in an unproven venture. The reality of the story is that the great venture capital firms did not come calling until the potential was proven. Jeff said that he did not want to come to the end of his life and wonder what might have been. In his mind, and in ours, it is far more satisfying to make the attempt, even if it fails, than never to have striven.

Can we make this practical and applicable to Western's situation? We think we can. Consider for a moment what we might do as an institution if we had a couple of psychology professors who did seminal work in a new and emerging field. Let's assume that they broke through the admittedly substantial publication barriers that exist for professors at small schools and established an international reputation, even helping to shape the emergence of the field. The specifics aren't important, but say it was something like establishing a breakthrough into the understanding of the minds of serial monsters, and it was accompanied by the development of a new curriculum which could arm generations of students to prevail in this battle. We know that there are many such individuals and teams of professors in a variety of areas here at Western at this very moment. What should we say to these people? "We're an SCU, we can't succeed here. We need to concentrate on what all the other SCUs concentrate on: preparing our students for jobs. You are simply seeking to forward your own status and you're playing a game you can't win." We would respond that we should pour resources into their venture; we should embrace the risk. If we fail, then we just pick ourselves up and look for other battles to wage. We will be comforted in our failure by knowing that we have striven. If we succeed, then we will have changed

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the very world. Our counsel is grounded in the sure knowledge that if we do not strive, we will always be only a member of the mass of SCUs. We find scant comfort in the understanding that we will have enjoyed a safe life steeped in the halls of academe and protected from the harrowing winds of change. For us, there is no such comfort. Nor, do we find comfort in saying that we will know that we have prepared students who cannot afford an elite education, who cannot expect to lead the world, for safe careers and jobs. We say teach our people to reach for the stars, to recognize the potential greatness that is at the heart of each individual. We say, Dare to Dream! We say, let's reach for those stars ourselves. One of our favorite Cherokee sayings goes something like this: it is better to aim your bow at the Sun and strike only an eagle than to aim for the eagle and have your arrow return to earth and strike a rock. Let's aim our bows at the Sun!

What does it take to train minds to change the world? At the risk of sounding elitist, we think we know the answer to that question. It requires us to teach them that the only limits to their grasp are those that they create in their own minds. Throughout history, far more giants of society have been educated in what some would call pedestrian universities than in all the elite institutions in the world. That continues to be the case today. All it takes is one professor to sow the seeds of greatness. Those seeds are self confidence, a sure recognition that the only failure comes from retiring from the field, from giving up, from settling because the great mass of the world thinks you cannot win. Failure brings with it learning and a renewed commitment to strive yet again until our hands close on what our minds can see.

We would like to close with a story. We all know the story of how David slew Goliath. For generations people have used that story to illustrate how a poorly armed, simple herdsman can prevail in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. But the real story has far more significance, You see, David selected six pebbles for his pouch before he entered the field of battle. Why six? Because Goliath had five brothers.

Jim and JoAnn Carland, Entrepreneurship

While I respect my colleague's views that SCUs are "not national in scope, not selective in admissions, not research extensive, and not focused on a liberal education," I take exception. We do have admission requirements/standards and I believe there is a major effort at WCU to focus on research on teaching (SoTL) that has merit. For me, personally, there is a difference in "seeking status" as a Research I institution, and seeking status as a high quality regional university that is clear about its mission. I came to WCU from a Research I institution that "wants" to be focused on research, but does not have the economic resources to sustain the mission defined by the state legislature for that university. So, my former colleagues teach masters level classes with 80-120 students and are still expected to do major research in their fields. The focus on teaching at WCU, which *IS* the history of SCUs, is the very reason I chose to seek employment at Western. I am proud to be an educator and I work to maintain professional integrity in my teaching through continued efforts to learn and grow as a teacher. It is my opinion that we should all want to be part of university that "seeks status" as a high quality institution, preparing people to be the best in their chosen fields as we can help them to be. I agree that it is unrealistic for every university in a state to be a Research I institution. I hope that the intent of Dr. Henderson's position is the importance of clarity in our mission rather than the things we are "not." Respectfully,

Jacque Jacobs, Educational Leadership & Foundations

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Do most faculty members think, in the course of their daily work lives, about WCU's status as a State Comprehensive University? I suspect not; in fact, I did not even know that WCU was an SCU until I read Bruce Henderson's article in December. Instead, consider whether a faculty member's emphasis on teaching and scholarship is driven by the ability to teach or research effectively, combined with the expectations of the teaching institution where tenure was sought or attained.

I have worked at four institutions of higher learning—each with a distinctly different institutional focus. I started at a research institution, moved to an adult education low residence college, shifted to a state teaching college, and now, as Bruce tells me, I am employed by an SCU. I didn't join these institutions because of the type of institution they are: I joined because they were in a good location or because they offered me the faculty or administrative position that I wanted. For the most part, I did not even stop to consider what type of institution they were.

Each of these institutions had a different emphasis and focus; sometimes it took awhile to figure out what it was. But these schools also had a common denominator: they rewarded faculty members who excelled—excelled at whatever was valued by the institution. These schools were flexible enough to reward good faculty members for doing what they do best: whether it be teaching, scholarship, service, or administrative work. Although Bruce suggests that we "opt out of the status game, a game we cannot win," the subtext is strikingly status-conscious: our students are not as well-prepared as other students (a thesis which I am not prepared to accept); the scholarship of teaching should be given equal status with traditional research in peer-reviewed journals; and "teaching comes first at SCU's."

Let's be realistic: status will always be an issue. But instead of applying value-laden judgments to our work, let's be inclusive and reward excellence of any sort that is valuable to the university. Not all faculty members are good teachers. But the university's role is to focus on the strengths of the faculty and reward them for the excellent work they do—whatever it is.

Jayne Zanglein, Visiting Instructor of Business Law

I hope Bruce Henderson's Faculty Forum piece on "Status, Scholarship, and Freedom at State Comprehensive Universities (SCU)" causes our new and seasoned faculty to stop and ponder the real value of research at Western, a SCU known across the state for its reputation for teaching excellence. Academic research is not about a quest for status. It is about the feeling of excitement you get when you share research findings with your students and peers. They get to see you think out loud as you describe what you did and why you did it. Sharing research with students gets them accustomed to speaking with facts not just opinions. Research energizes teaching, sustains faculty competence, and enriches student learning.

Western Carolina University should celebrate all types of research—applied research, theoretical research, sponsored research, mainstream research, specialized research, and the scholarship of teaching and learning. Each of these types of research increases faculty credibility and elevates student learning. It is particularly important for faculty at SCU's to engage undergraduate and graduate students in the research process. Research is empowering; it promotes clarity of thought, logical reasoning and effective problem solving. Armed with these skills, students will maintain an excitement about learning that will last a lifetime.

Scott Higgins, Research and Graduate Studies

Responses to "Status, Scholarship, and Freedom at State Comprehensive Universities" by Bruce Henderson, 12/1/05

As a new faculty member at WCU, I have had the opportunity to experience first hand the teaching environments described in Dr. Henderson's essay on faculty scholarship. At my last university, I struggled for 10 years with these exact issues. As an actively practicing physician who made a career choice to enter academia in 1995, I made a conscious choice to embrace teaching as my new professional activity. I viewed this activity as equally important as practice or research and original publications, and over the years I have received enormous reinforcement from students for this decision. However, evaluation of faculty involved the usual criteria of funded research leading to original publications in the discipline. Having already been successful in one career in the private sector, I deliberately chose to be "unambitious" and to define my own criteria for scholarly activity—professional development, teaching innovations, and conference presentations in topic areas important to my discipline. I have found this to be personally satisfying, and this perspective was the vision I kept firmly in mind for all of my faculty activities. I do believe that the traditional criteria for evaluating faculty are elitist. They are designed to garner acclamation for the teaching institution but necessarily must limit the time and energy spent on student learning and student support. Those areas must be viewed as paramount if we are to optimize student outcomes. I have been surprised to find, based on student feedback from my graduate professional adult learners, that this type of scholarly behavior better defined my function as a role model for continuing education and professional preparedness than if I pursued traditional scholarly activities. The work of SCUs is vitally important, and should not be viewed as less prestigious because faculty choose to focus their talents in areas that are student-centered. I would applaud a deliberate philosophy of celebrating student-centered faculty activity as our primary mission.

Claire DeCristofaro, Nursing