



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 18, No. 7

April 1, 2006

The Liberal Studies Program: What FACULTY Have to Do With It

In the last six or eight semesters of Faculty Forum, faculty have characterized Liberal Studies Program (LS) advising as confusing and unnecessarily complex and the LS curriculum as irrelevant and meaningless. However, recent essays have also enthusiastically discussed liberal studies learning initiatives, service learning, civic engagement, learning communities, Student-Academic Affairs collaborations, and more efficient referrals of first-year students. So, are we just complaining or are we trying to find solutions?

I write as a former Director of First-Year Composition, a former member of the Liberal Studies Oversight Committee, the Liberal Studies Assessment Committee, and a tenured associate professor who has taught liberal studies courses at WCU every semester, from 1997 to the present. Granted, administrative offices and officers need to remedy some problems in LS; however, let's look for a moment at what FACULTY have done to create LS, and what they can do to strengthen it. The Liberal Studies Program was designed by faculty. Changes made to this Liberal Studies Program have been made at the request of faculty to the Liberal Studies Oversight Committee, comprised of faculty, whose recommendations were approved or denied by the Faculty Senate. All liberal studies courses are taught by faculty in programs, departments, colleges run by faculty. If faculty do not like the current LS, then faculty need to change it. If changes require help from administration, let's get it. If we can't, let's get on with matters about which faculty can make a difference. If some of us are unable or unwilling to be involved, let's support colleagues who are. Faculty are responsible for the shape Liberal Studies is in. Who is teaching your liberal studies courses? Is it:

- Faculty who design the curriculum they teach, who teach the curriculum they design?
- Faculty who teach a mix of LS and non-LS courses (rather than, say, a 4/4 LS load)?
- Faculty who are actively involved and included in departmental initiatives and decisions?

- Faculty who know WCU well enough to communicate and collaborate effectively with people and offices across campus?
- Faculty who can articulate for students connections among liberal studies, studies in the major, and their professional and civic lives?
- Faculty who are eligible for all incentives and rewards for teaching LS courses, as required by the Liberal Studies document and supported by the Faculty Senate?
- Faculty for whom advising is a required responsibility?
- Faculty who have educated and applied themselves in the means and ends of program assessment?
- Faculty directly informed and involved in meeting WCU's retention and recruitment demands?
- Faculty who make enough money not to need another job?
- Faculty who know they have a job beyond the current year?
- Faculty who have an office and computer to themselves (and no more than one office mate)?
- Faculty who are eligible for all professional development funds?
- Faculty who have the authority to influence the design of colleges and definitions of work or course loads?
- Faculty, in other words, who have the rights and responsibilities of professors on the tenure-track or in tenured positions, rather than lecturers or adjuncts partially equipped and ill-supported in temporary positions?

I offer this list of questions as a check sheet to determine what FACULTY are doing and need to do in LS. If you did not answer YES to these questions, you may turn them into a "To Do" list. The goal: give the job to the people you best equip and support or best equip and support the people you give the job.

Marsha Lee Baker, English

The opinions printed here belong solely to the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the editorial staff or of the Faculty Center. If you would like to respond, e-mail Nienhuis by the 8th of the month.

Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "The Liberal Studies Program: What FACULTY Have to Do With It," by Marsha Baker, 4/1/06

I enjoyed this article and your questions were right on target. You have taught it, tried to make it better, and supported the faculty teaching it. I appreciate all the time and energy you have spent in trying to make this program better. I appreciate you and what you do for our students and the university.

Fred Hinson, Associate Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs

Familiarity Can Breed Contempt

In response to Marsha Baker's suggestions about liberal studies, I would like to suggest it might be time for faculty to discuss a related issue, the effectiveness and impact of learning communities on academics and student life.

I have been teaching a first-year seminar for three years. Many of the 22 students each year take the same courses and live together as well, a popular design in college learning communities. Such immersion in a social group, in theory, may help students establish strong, social peer groups, positively impacting WCU's retention problem. It may create life-long friendships, which can be great for loyalty to the University and alumni giving. But, it can also backfire.

Each year, I have seen friendships blossom and wilt, sometimes deteriorating dramatically and interfering with class. For instance, Susie won't work in a group project with Jenny because (she says) Jenny always comes home drunk, keeps her up till 4:30 a.m., and, to top it off, tried to go out with her boyfriend. Or four young women drag themselves out of bed, arriving at class at 9:30 exactly, or late or not at all, looking like they had been studying sex and alcohol all night, hardly able to keep their eyes open for the next 75 minutes. At least one of them arrives in her pajamas. Or John, who is very smart, becomes a pariah in class because he is always ready and prepared, has done the reading and writing assignments, and does not participate enough in the social shenanigans of the group.

These examples reflect only a few of my observations, but after three years of watching social relations interfere with academics, I can't help question the wisdom of too much familiarity. I also suspect that the unhappy social events may also increase the WCU drop out rate. I'm not a moral conservative, and these scenarios don't offend me – they just interfere with my function as a teacher. I'm not paid to be a dorm mother, social director, or drug and alcohol counselor. I would love to know if other faculty have observed similar behaviors in learning communities. Or are my first year students unusually rambunctious?

Mary Jean Ronan Herzog, Educational Leadership & Foundations