



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

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Systemic Challenges Require Systemic Solutions (or, "Fore!")

Consider three issues: **(1) Students Can't Write.** *Solution:* The Composition-Condition Mark (CC grade). *Status:* A brilliant bureaucratic innovation is languishing. **(2) Student retention and graduation rates are too low.** *Solution:* Perhaps hiring a consulting firm, but more than that. *Status:* Potential progress. **(3) Faculty service/engagement is undervalued.** *Solution:* Reexamination of the faculty roles-and-reward structure. *Status:* Progress.

(1) Employers consistently rank poor communication skills as among the worst deficiencies that recent college graduates display. UNC President Bowles has recalled his dismay, back when he was an executive in the private sector, at the inability of recent college graduates to write a coherent paragraph. Fostering in students the "ability to communicate effectively," or words to that effect, occurs in most university mission statements. One way to approach this challenge is to spend five or ten thousand hours of faculty time instituting a "Writing-Across-the-Curriculum" program. Here at Western, we already have the formula for a more efficient and effective approach, the Composition-Condition Mark: *A student whose written work in any course fails to meet acceptable standards will be assigned a composition-condition (CC) mark by the instructor on the final grade report.*

Students who receive two such marks before earning 110 credit hours must take an additional English composition course. This procedure represents a brilliant institutional solution to a systemic problem. The responsibility for identifying student weakness is distributed to all faculty who give writing assignments but this requires no additional work on their part. Regrettably, this savvy systemic solution is languishing. Many faculty are either not made aware of, or not reminded of, the Composition Conditional checkbox on the final grade report and so do not take advantage of it. Worse, with the recent implementation of Banner, the "CC" option no longer appears on faculty electronic grade sheets. Fortunately, both the office of the registrar and the office of the provost are working to correct this procedural setback. Western Carolina may not be blessed with the strongest students in the UNC system, but it could shine a bright light down Cantwrite Alley—to the long-term benefit of the student, the institution, and the state.

(2) Western's freshmen-to-sophomore retention rate is about 70%. Our four-year graduation rate is about 24% and our six-year rate about 47%. Although this graduation rate is at about the national average for similar institutions, both the provost and the chancellor, supported by the President Bowles, have stated unequivocally that these

numbers must be improved. To focus on just one of these statistics, Western's six-year graduation rate, 47%, has remained unchanged over the recent 10-year period for which data are available (Western is not the only UNC school with no improvement here). Some may blame Cullowhee, but we can't blame the mountains. Over the same 10-year period Appalachian State improved this statistic by 4 percentage points (to 64%), UNC-Asheville by 11 points (to 53%).

In his State of the University address Chancellor Bardo announced the ambitious goal of raising Western's six-year graduation rate dramatically, to 65%, with no reduction in academic standards. Obviously faculty will play a critical role here. But meaningful institutional support is also crucial. While meeting need-based financial aid goals, the institution can improve incoming freshmen class profiles. Western can also cultivate community college connections, support the summer bridge (orientation) program, and ensure that the early alert system has the resources it needs for meaningful intervention and follow-up. And, as the chancellor discussed, also important are both continued work towards better integration of academics and student affairs, and progress towards the development of a "campus downtown."

(3) The importance of service has been well-addressed by Senate Chairman Richard Beam's commentary in last month's *Faculty Forum*. Faculty service will always take a back seat to quality teaching and appropriate research or work-product, but must it be the malnourished step-child? Campus-wide e-mails touting yet another service "opportunity" are not the answer—but recent institutional initiatives offer hope. First, the chancellor has announced supplemental funds that will be made available, in the form of "significant" stipends, for each course that a faculty member teaches "using a recognized integrated engagement model." More precise description, as well as procedural guidelines, are being worked out. There has been some concern expressed that we are borrowing from Peter in order to pay Paul—with specific reference to reduced QEP funding. Faculty should be cognizant of the trade-off here, and may want to refer to the specific language of the chancellor's speech on the Web.

Second, the chancellor announced that by next year deans and department heads will be formally evaluated on, among other items, "management and leadership effectiveness." In this connection we might agree that one dimension on which such leaders should be evaluated is to the effect that: "*the administrator takes concrete steps to ensure equity of faculty workload—across the combination of an appropriate weighting of teaching, research, and service.*" The chancellor did not go so far as to suggest that faculty would take part in these evaluations—as is routinely done in some other states—but this is certainly an important step forward towards documenting administrative accountability and achieving institutional goals.

I am fond of golf metaphors, but then somebody has to be the club, which has negative connotations. Perhaps we could just imagine that the ball is on the tee, the fairway stretches out before us, and the swing is in motion. Now for the follow-through.

Gary H. Jones, Business Communication (BCIS/E)

Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to Gary Jones's, "Systemic Challenges Require Systemic Solutions (or, 'Fore!')," (3/1/07)

Over the years, the university has researched the retention problem in many ways, including the gathering of information from students who leave before they graduate. However, that process has sometimes proved to be more difficult than one would think. As part of the withdrawal process in Student Affairs, students were asked to complete a survey form asking the reasons why they were leaving the institution. Most of the reasons were highly personalized (illness, money, etc.) to the individual. Factor analysis of the data did not provide any specific factors why students left the university. Also, most individuals were in a hurry to complete the form to exit the university so the data was questionable. Studies of university students withdrawals administered nationally found the same results. Students did not always give the real reason for leaving but identified the most acceptable one in order to finish the check-out process. The Office of Institutional Research also prepared a report for many years for General Administration concerning students who were initially enrolled at Western with good standing but later failed to return. Response rates were so dismal from most UNC institutions that General Administration eventually stopped the requirement. It is very difficult to receive a statistically significant response rate from students after they have left the institution, move on, and no longer have ties with Western. Does that mean we shouldn't try to collect data from students that are leaving or have withdrawn from the university? NO!! It just means that we need to think of better ways of obtaining the data but not reinvent the wheel.

Renee Corbin, Director of Assessment, College of Education and Allied Professions

On issue number 2, retention, I agree with Gary: we can't blame the mountains. ASU has Boone. UNCA has Asheville. WCU has a highway at its front door and a slum at its back door. Check out the back door at "Welcome to Cullowhee" at <http://picasaweb.google.com/mrherzog/WelcomeToCullowhee02>.

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