



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 20, No. 1

September 1, 2007

Let's Be Serious About QEP

This summer, I got a call from a student who wanted to sign up for 21 hours next semester. My first thought was, "21 hours? How can he take 21 hours? He must be a genius. I don't think I could take 21 hours and do a good job." I asked him if he's a good student and he said, "Yeah, I'm pretty good." Turns out he had a 4.0 last semester with some pretty heavy duty courses; he wanted to take 21 hours so he could transfer out of Western ASAP.

That got me thinking. It used to be that 15 hours was an average semester course load. A student might take 18 hours if it was necessary to graduate, but it was an extraordinary occurrence. Now, students routinely take 18 hours. Why? Is it because WCU, through our administrative policies, encourages students to take too many courses? Or is it because our courses are not rigorous enough?

Let's first look at WCU's administrative policies to see how they encourage this "way-too-many-courses-to-take-seriously" phenomenon. First, students don't have to get permission to take as many as 19 hours. (They are permitted to take 23 hours if approved by the Provost and 12 hours in a single summer session if approved by the Dean!). Second, there is no academic disincentive for students to pass courses the first time. They are permitted to replace 5 course grades: the equivalent of one semester's worth of grades. Third, there is no financial disincentive for students who fail a course. They don't have to pay to retake the course. The only surcharge comes at the end of the student's career if she takes more than 140 hours.

Let's turn to the question of whether our courses are rigorous enough. If we stick to the old rule—three hours of class preparation for every hour of classroom contact—then a student taking 18 hours is supposed to be going to class and preparing to go to class 72 hours a week. We **know** that's not happening. Even if we reduce the ratio to 2:1, then the student is working 54 hours a week both in and out of class. That's still not happening. How about a 1:1 ratio? Do we even think that students are spending 36 hours on their academics? I seriously doubt that most students do.

The foundation for our newly-created Quality Enhancement Plan is supposed to be an intellectually stimulating and challenging curriculum that teaches critical thinking skills. Through the QEP, we aspire to teach students the process of learning how to ask the right questions, how to analyze and synthesize information, and how to apply learning in new contexts.

Is it responsible for us, as a university, to advocate a Quality Enhancement Plan that emphasizes critical thinking, professionalism, and responsibility at the same time as we encourage students to take more courses than they can possibly handle?

In order to think critically, students need time to reflect. We should give them the opportunity to experiment with cross-disciplinary approaches. We should help students apply concepts learned in class to their life outside of class. We need to inspire them to become active participants in their education and to become life-long learners.

We can do this in three hours a week only if students have enough time and motivation to do the work outside of class and if professors have enough time to mentor and guide students with respect to their education.

What if, as a university, we agreed that students should prepare, on average, three hours out of class for every hour in class? What if we also agreed that students would be expected to take, on average, 15 courses a semester, with 18 hours to be viewed as an exception? Finally, what if a select number of courses/sections were designated as "critical thinking" courses and students were required to take two of such courses a semester? Would my 4.0 student be in such a rush to transfer to another school? Or would he want to stick around at WCU and see what the QEP has to offer?

Jayne Zanglein, Marketing & Business Law

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 Terry Nienhuis by the 20th of the month. Your responses will be published with the next issue of The Faculty Forum.

Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to Jayne Zanglein's "Let's Be Serious About QEP," (9/1/07)

Jayne--Hear, hear!

Mary Ellen Griffin, Psychology, Adjunct

I knew one guy from my undergrad years at Columbia who was taking 24 hours--12 at Columbia in General Studies and 12 at the Theological Seminary. Naturally, he was an A student.

Bob Strauss, Hunter Library

Many high school graduates come to us unable to spell or to write coherently, lacking in discipline or desire, yet proudly sporting a relatively high G.P.A. from his or her high school and a sense of entitlement unequalled since the mighty coalition forces returned from crushing Granada. On the other hand WE must constantly seek ways to invigorate OUR retention strategies, revisit and revamp OUR outcomes assessment plans, whilst raising the oft-referred-to "bar." Give me a break. Is QEP just the latest in a long line of acronyms for post-high-school day care? The key to retention is students going to class and doing their home work. The key to QEP, outcomes assessment, or any other current Raleigh-speak is students going to class and doing their homework. College is, by its very nature, a form of intellectual elitism. If I am expected to spend my time doing remedial work in order to assure that no child is left behind, fine. Okay. Maybe by the time they graduate some of the students will have read Moby Dick. "Aut disce aut discede."

Stephen Ayers, Stage and Screen

I echo your sentiments concerning the inability of students to write academically (or even "coherently"). In regard to spelling, I honestly don't think it matters too terribly much anymore. Even the most rudimentary computer programs correct spelling. But spell checks aside and ignoring the plethora of what I like to call the "their, there and they're conundrums" of the writing world, it does seem, even to this young whippersnapper, that quality writing is in decline. Place the blame where you will. Apathy, ignorance, a decaying sense of academic elitism, and standardized tests serve as truly worthy targets. Suffice it to say, I understand your frustration in constantly having to revamp your policies in order to cater to the academically regressing student body. After all, you have your Ph.D., and they don't.

BUT, playing devil's advocate, isn't it equally as "entitled" and "arrogant" to assume that you (read: the erudite members of academia) have achieved some level of pedagogic perfection? As technology and educational theory evolve, do not you likewise have the obligation to, at the very least, CONSIDER the alteration of your own "retention strategies"? While I hate to play this card, aren't the students

PAYING to go to school? Paying tuition does not entitle the students by any means; in the scholastic hierarchy, teacher is king. But remembering who pays the bills should provide some form of motivation for you. Shouldn't you want to help them learn? (Notice I said help them learn, not spoon-feed them diplomas).

You are right. College comes down to going to class, listening to every word that the paid "experts" have to say, and doing your corresponding homework (preferably in a timely fashion). Amazing how straightforward it all really is. And yet, I honestly think your impatience with sending in your grades electronically is not much different from your students' reluctance to read Moby Dick. However correct some facets of your logic may be, it would be far more persuasive to argue for contemporarily viable educational practices than to insist on this pertinacious push for stasis. Or even, god forbid, a retrogression to the days of yore: sans internet but with abacuses and parchment paper aplenty.

Michael Ayers (Stephen's son), a recent graduate of Duke University

Reading Jayne's comments reminded me of a former student from last fall who emailed me this past spring asking for a letter of recommendation to help her transfer OUT of Western to UNC-A. As we met to discuss her reasons for leaving Western, I encouraged this student to compose the email I'm attaching here. Jayne raises some excellent points that are hard to ignore and she also makes points that tie in with the ongoing discussion of student retention. My former student's much needed and appreciated comments perhaps shed even more light on this discussion:

Hey Mr. Hendrix,

I wanted to go ahead and write some stuff you can share at the next group meeting. Here are some of the reasons I think Western has such a low retention rate; they are also the main reasons I plan to leave WCU. The level of academic seriousness is slim to none; I understand that this is also a "freshman" thing but I have also visited other colleges and stayed with peers there and the problem is much more evident at Western. The workload I've experienced is by no means "hard," which I'm not opposed to (ha ha), but I also think the typical workload gives off the impression that WCU is easy. When I was applying to WCU, everyone who had heard about the school had the idea that "anyone can get into Western" and that impression persists, as far as I can see. Grades and SAT scores are not always an accurate reflection of a person and I think that weak students could be somewhat reduced by an essay requirement (I'm really big on writing but I know some smart people who can't write); some other type of decision-making tool in the application process would help. At WCU, extracurricular activities other than band and sports don't have enough participation. Western has events that are not very popular and most people at WCU are apathetic about anything other than drinking and barely getting by academically. For instance, I rarely (ok, never) hear about appealing theatre events or social clubs via word of mouth, and posters are not very convincing for the most part. The professors and advising centers, as well as the overall layout and system of WCU are very satisfying; however, all of the above are ruined by the level of apathy in classes. I often think "Does anyone actually WANT to be here?" This is probably the main reason I'm leaving and it's sad because I really like WCU otherwise. I think WCU needs to be harder to get into, point blank. There are wayyyyy too many people at WCU who don't need to be in college, period, much less weighing down the classes at WCU. I feel like the ignorance and apathy of certain students is ruining what would be an otherwise perfect school. WCU needs to work with the community of Cullowhee (not Sylva) about developing more places to go for students without cars; it needs programs and

rewards that attract the more scholarly folk. If it would take care of those few major problems I would definitely consider returning to WCU later on in college. Hope that helped! Feel free to share with anyone who needs to see it. I'll stay in touch! Thanks so much for the letter!

A student who transferred from Western to UNC-A this past spring

I've shared this student's letter with three of my four classes this semester and most of my students find her email offensive, whiny, and inaccurate. Many of my present students blamed her for not taking advantage of the opportunities that Western does offer for students to socialize, and some feel that it's the student's responsibility to seek out opportunities for activities, relationships, and learning opportunities.

Eric Hendrix, English