



# Faculty Forum

*From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning*

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## **What Should We Tell the New Faculty Members?**

So many new faces on campus. I hear a very large number of faculty members have joined us in the last five years. What advice should old timers like me give them about being successful at WCU? Here are two alternative scripts.

Model #1. Teaching is primary. The enabling legislation for the University of North Carolina says so. Be willing to teach a wide array of courses in your discipline. That will help out your department. Work hard to improve your courses. That will help your students. Make students work hard, giving them interesting things to read and assignments that make them think and write. Provide substantial feedback to your students on their papers and exams. Read broadly in your discipline, keeping up with the new advances and also keep up with what is new in the pedagogy of your discipline. Collaborate with your colleagues to develop an effective curriculum and to share ways of improving your teaching. Help give the university a reputation for challenging, effective instruction. Take your expertise out to public venues whenever appropriate. Do modest amounts of disciplinary research, especially when you can involve students. You were educated to do so, it keeps you and the students interested in your field, and it is fun. Be a good advisor. Do your share of institutional chores.

Model #2. Most important, specialize in some aspect of your discipline, no matter how obscure or esoteric. Make sure it is in the mainstream, but cutting edge. Publish in high visibility disciplinary journals. Seek research grants, especially those with considerable indirect cost support and ample release from teaching. Spend as much time off campus as you can afford to so you can make friends with potential peer reviewers. Avoid teaching duties outside your specialty, especially interdisciplinary courses that will draw you away from your specific expertise. Teach with enthusiasm but limit your efforts to the time you actually spend in the classroom. Do not give assignments or exams that will take time to read and grade. Do not let your courses get a crib reputation, but don't demand too much from your students either. Seek release from teaching whenever possible. Take on the absolute minimum of institutional chores. Certainly shun any program administration responsibilities. A little public service goes a long way too. Avoid it unless it involves specific applications of your research or is required by the granting agencies supporting your research. Make it clear that your commitment is to your discipline and to gaining national visibility, not to WCU. Make sure administrators are always worried you will leave, taking your national reputation elsewhere.

The dilemma. Which to recommend? For more than 20 years I have argued that the balance in Model #1 should provide our model of excellence. I am still convinced that Model #2 is a recipe for institutional mediocrity and pretentiousness at universities like WCU. I even wrote a book saying as much. But recent experiences in our TPR process and reading the description of the Madison Professorship have convinced me that to persuade new faculty members at WCU of the wisdom of my approach is unfair to them. Unless you are willing to risk failure in the TPR process and unless you are happy being part of the blue collar work university work force, don't follow Model #1. It will not get you the national visibility you need to be recognized as one of the best at WCU. You can't be a "distinguished" professor following Model #1.

If you want to join the elite, to be a Madison Professor, or even to ensure tenure, promotion, and substantial merit raises, there is no option. Pursue Model #2. The closer you are to Model #2, the more rapidly salary increases, tenure, and promotion will follow. The simple fact is that there is no national competitive market for good teachers or those who provide public service. Forget the talk about Boyer. Unless you can get it in print, it won't count, and discovery research counts most by far. Forget engagement, no matter how insistent the rhetoric or the need. The chances of getting it peer reviewed and in print are just too risky. Unless your children need clothing and food, forget teaching summer school no matter the need of students for the courses. Engagement and teaching will not get you national visibility. Cosmopolitan is good, local or regional is bad.

Aim for somewhere in between? Not recommended. The farther you stray from Model #2, the more you risk your national visibility. You risk having to teach more courses and spending too much time in your office. Somewhere in the middle will decrease the passion you need for real success and leave you with few options. The message is clear. Stick close to Model #2 or risk becoming part of the huddled, undistinguished masses. You don't want to be part of a university community of scholarship. You want to be a scholar in a university community looking out for your own interests. That is Western's model for faculty success.

**Bruce Henderson, Psychology**

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