



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 20. No. 8

May 1, 2008

"Terry, Thank You for the Conversation"

This year marks the 20th anniversary of The Faculty Forum. More importantly, the article in your hand will be the last of the nearly 200 essays edited by Terry Nienhuis. In 1998, Terry wrote a retrospective on The Forum's 10th anniversary. It is time for another.

Origins: The Forum came about one afternoon when Terry and Ben Ward, the director of the newly organized Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence, were sitting on a sofa in the Center, mulling over the idea of publishing an informal publication written by and for WCU faculty members. It would feature monthly essays, followed two weeks later by an issue devoted to rejoinders and teaching tips. Volume 1, Number 1 of the Faculty Forum appeared on October 15, 1988. The headline was "A Call for Opinions."

Terry and Ben wanted The Forum to be edgy and controversial. They succeeded with the first faculty essay, a piece by Bruce Henderson warning us of the "Tyranny of the Textbook." Jim Carland, a professor in the School of Business, was not impressed with Bruce's argument. Two weeks later Jim's response appeared, "I am angry and insulted! I have written textbooks; I am writing one. And I disagree with Bruce vehemently." The Henderson/Carland dispute set the tone of the new publication. The games had begun.

A Voice/A History: Back issues of The Forum offer an insider's perspective on the recent history of WCU. (Issues from 2001 to the present will soon be available on-line; issues from 1988 to 2001 are kept in two notebooks in the Faculty Center.) At the start, Terry assumed Forum essays would focus on teaching. It soon became clear, however, that the publication was serving as a mechanism for faculty members to air an array of concerns. In the early years, these included declining academic standards, sexual harassment, faculty retention, and our (still) pitiful summer school salaries. Some early Faculty Forum pieces had a big impact. An article by Wilburn Hayden helped launch the University Club. An essay by Linda Kinnear on the plight of part-time faculty generated five pages of responses and resulted in fundamental changes in the hiring practices in the English Department. A series of articles on faculty salaries served as a wake up call to persistent inequities in the distribution of merit pay. And Mary Jean Herzog's phrase, "A Culture of Silence" became incorporated into the lexicon of faculty searching for a more effective voice at WCU. (Other articles had no effect. These include my 1995 suggestion that songs by Marvin Gaye and Kitty Wells be added to the play list of the campus carillon.)

Many early Forum essays foreshadowed issues that we struggle with today. In the last Faculty Forum, Bruce Henderson cautioned us about a pernicious drift in the tenure and promotion process toward traditional scholarship at the expense of teaching and university engagement. Back issues of the Forum show that the conflict between teaching and research has been a perennial sore point. For example, in 1990, Cliff Lovin, then dean

of Arts and Sciences, wrote an essay titled, "Teaching Has Always Been #1." The rejoinder came a month later in an article by Bill Kane, a perennial gadfly, whose response was titled "Teaching is Dead Last, or Worse." While Bill disagreed with the dean, he captured the spirit of The Forum in the last sentence of his essay: "Cliff, thank you for the conversation."

The Forum has given WCU faculty a voice that is rare at any university. Terry, thank you for the conversation.

The Last Word: It seems only fair to let the outgoing editor have the last word. Here is a conversation I had with Terry in his office in the English Department.

Terry, how much time goes into producing the Faculty Forum? I kept a log one year. I came up with 100 to 120 hours a semester. But this only counted my time, not the authors', the distributors', or the printers'. The truth is that I think about it all the time—looking for new topics, editing, soliciting articles. Finding people to write the articles every month is sometimes agonizing.

I have written a couple of articles for The Forum that the administration could not have been happy with, yet I never felt a shred of censorship. Has this ever been a problem? There has never been any censorship.

In the first issue of The Forum, you wrote that the articles would focus on teaching, yet many of the most controversial essays seem unrelated to teaching. Over the years some administrators have complained "it does not have enough to do with teaching." But I always interpreted "having to do with teaching" in a very broad way. I believe that almost everything in the university has some impact on teaching—for example, faculty morale. Ben Ward and I were constantly asking ourselves, "How does this relate to teaching?" I was always pushing that envelope when it came to that connection.

I have recently gone back and read the first decade of Forum essays. They are all very well written. (Laugh) I am not very good as an original writer, but I can edit up a storm. My job is to make the prose presentable. Luckily, most faculty contributions are very well-written to start with.

In retrospect, what impact do you think the Forum has had on our campus? When Ben and I sat on the sofa envisioning the future, we said we wanted the Forum to be noticed, to be read, to be taken seriously—for faculty to consider The Forum to be something that they own and where they have the freedom to say what they want to say. And I think that has happened. I have heard people say over and over, "The Forum is an important part of the faculty voice." It is a place where faculty, if they have the nerve, can say what is important to them.

Hal Herzog, Psychology

In the fall, the Faculty Forum will continue under the editorship of Vera Guise.