



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 13, No. 1

September 1, 2000

The Faculty's Role in Student Retention

Over the past few years, WCU has made many changes to address student retention. We have changed the processes by which we recruit and orient students, provided more things to do on campus (and in the surrounding community), looked into new advising methods and models, created learning communities and more focused residential arrangements, and tried a myriad of other initiatives. All of these efforts are admirable and well intentioned, but they are only small pieces in the complex retention puzzle. So what's missing? I suspect it is faculty ownership and acceptance of responsibility for the problem.

Let's not kid ourselves. Our students leave because **WE** do not motivate them enough to stay. While we may prefer to place the blame on factors beyond our control, we must accept the fact that student retention is primarily dependent on faculty actions (or inaction) toward students. Efforts to improve retention rates will only "succeed" to the extent that **WE** are willing to do some critical self-analysis and change some of our behaviors.

So, what do we, as faculty, need to do? No single strategy is likely to have much impact. True impact will come from coordinated efforts and fundamental shifts in how we approach our jobs and "how we do things" in general. Here are some of the things I have gleaned from discussions with students (some who have stayed, some who have not):

- Make sure classes, especially introductory classes, are **NOT** like high school classes. In other words, make the work more meaningful and applied. It only takes one or two "standard lecture and test-based classes" to convince new students that WCU is just an extension of high school.
- Take attendance as a means for tracking student interest and potential problems, not as a means for "policing" students. Face it, students skip class because they don't see value in attending. Making attendance "mandatory" is misguided, misdirected, and totally ineffective--and likely to generate even more resistance (which we know limits learning and development).
- Follow up on perceived disinterest or "problems" in students. Sure, we can always write this off as "their responsibility"--but doing so is only denying our role in the process. I have been amazed at the impact of approaching students who have missed two consecutive classes by inquiring "Is everything OK? I noticed you missed class the last couple of days." Sure, discuss the consequences of such absences, but try to focus on core issues, like motivation.
- Don't make scheduling the main focus of advising sessions. Sure, some students need help learning our system and doing some planning, but emphasis on scheduling during advising creates dependence and replaces the individual connections needed for good advising. Advising should focus on student development issues.
- Provide students with assignments and activities that are engaging and of personal interest. The quality of student work is directly affected by their interest in doing the assignment. Let them customize their work to their lives. We should never pass judgement or restrict the

student's choice of context. Assigning all students the same paper, with the same focus on the same topic, is as boring for them to write as it is for us to read.

All students come to college with preconceived notions about what college will be like. Most expect the work to be more challenging than high school, but they also expect that these heightened expectations will be accompanied by increased support. When the support does not follow, students become frustrated and burned out on school, and look elsewhere to satisfy their needs. By this point, we have missed the opportunity to make a good impression, and essentially failed that student (student "failure" is as much a reflection of us as it is of them).

Improving student retention will entail some infringement upon faculty autonomy. As a result, such changes may be labeled as "threats to faculty freedom" or as "violations" of other principles. In other words, we always seem to come up with what we believe are "good reasons" for maintaining the status quo. Thus, addressing these deep-rooted resisters to change will require significant structural and cultural shifts on campus. Some potential focus points for such structural and cultural shifts include:

- Only our most dynamic and student-focused faculty should teach introductory courses. While this may include some of our adjuncts (many are excellent teachers and scholars), we need to be aware of the underlying messages sent to students who view their teacher as a "part-timer."
- We need to move away from our overemphasis on "course releases" for faculty. It seems that every time faculty take on new responsibilities (administrative, usually), we reduce their time in the classroom as compensation. While this may be appropriate at times and with certain faculty, any decision to reduce teaching load sends a message to students and others that "other things" are more important than student education.
- We need to find more and better ways to encourage faculty to adopt teaching methods that better parallel our students' interests and particular needs. We expect our students to be flexible and creative. We must exhibit these same characteristics. Part of this is making "class visits" by colleagues more than just "a check in the square."
- We need to identify and take action with faculty who are notorious for not caring, not being helpful, or not being flexible or considerate of student concerns and issues. Clearly, this is a tough issue--but our persistent and pervasive culture of conflict avoidance breeds alienation and cynicism, and has subtle but insidiously detrimental impact on our students. If student learning is really the hallmark of this institution, as stated in our mission and other documents, we must be willing to take action when faculty are not helping fulfill this mission. Call it whatever you'd like, but faculty must be more accountable for their actions or inaction.
- We need to get away from the "all faculty as advisors" model. We do a huge disservice to our students when we assign them to an advisor who lacks the knowledge, skills, or interest to do the job well. Some of us are good advisors, others are good at administrative work, and others have talents in other areas. We should focus our attention where we can do the most good.

Students want the same things we want: to be valued, respected, and understood as INDIVIDUALS. We must show them that we see them as more than names and numbers on a grade sheet and FTE's. I am not suggesting that we "spoon feed" them or cater to their every whim. Let's just make sure our high expectations are matched by our encouragement and support.

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