



Faculty Forum

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Cullowhee: A Place Apart From the Madding Crowd?

In the August edition of *The Reporter*, Chancellor Bardo draws our attention to perhaps the most perplexing question at WCU: "Why don't our students stay?" Our retention problems have been blamed on everything from an uncaring faculty to the perception that there is a lack of exciting things to do in Cullowhee. While WCU loses only thirteen percent of its freshmen to academic suspension, our overall freshman non-retention rate is "nearly thirty-one percent." Lots of students who could stay here "make a choice not to return." Why?

Yesterday, in ten-minute conferences with my English 101 Learning Community students, we talked about our most recent assignment, the memoir. For most, this is their first college paper.

Act 1: Mike's paper talks about becoming an uncle for the first time. He reminisces about waiting for the late night phone call and about his mother's hysterics over her first grandchild. We talk about adding description, showing his mother's joy and his brother's anticipation. I suggest that Mike should describe the first time he held his nephew. But while we talk about descriptive details, about showing versus telling, we also talk about school. "How's school going?" I ask.

"It's alright. Things are pretty good, and the Learning Community is good, too. It helps when you have questions about what's going on in class," Mike says, nodding his head. (This year, our Learning Community decided to capitalize on WCU's unique locale: the mountains, the rivers, and our history; ultimately we are trying to explore the ways people find value in places, specifically the western North Carolina mountains.)

"How do you like it here?" I venture to inquire.

"Well, I'm not used to all this outdoor stuff. I'm used to staying home and going to the mall. I'm from near Raleigh and we don't do all this," Mike says, shrugging his shoulders.

Act 2: We read David's paper about surfing. His story begins as he and his brother are caught in the middle of a storm; from there he describes the high waves, the howling winds, and the prevailing danger. Yet, in between the saltwater and rolling currents, David describes, with considerable insight, the significance of surfing; it reigns as his passion, the core of his relationships, and his outlet for recreation. I am moved by his powerful descriptions, and I am stunned as he reveals the many meanings of this sport. At the same time, it leads me to comment, "This is really nice, David. But I have to ask, 'Why are you at Western?'" Here we step beyond the real purpose of the conference; we're no longer talking words, sentences, and descriptions. David mentions that his grades were good enough to get into NC State, but then he replies, "I don't know. I just don't know."

The examples of Mike and David typify the experiences of many of our freshmen. I consider myself a caring faculty member, willing to spend time assisting students in meeting academic standards and willing to establish relationships with them. However, Mike and David have the credentials to be here, perhaps ought to be here, yet don't have a fundamental reason for wanting to be here. We gather students like Mike from bigger cities that are surrounded by malls, stores, movies, bars, and so-called conveniences at every turn. The transition to Cullowhee is abrupt.

Also, we entice students, like David, whose passions are miles away from the mountains and rivers of this area, and their transition is also unsettling. While I recognize that some students may eventually discover Cullowhee as a treasure in the mountains, with plenty of recreation, rigorous academics, little traffic, and nice people, we rely too much on hoping that our students will find something here that they like. Instead we should harness our resources and consciously attract students who WANT to be in an area like ours: near the mountains and rivers, away from the cities, and in a place where one has to be resourceful to be content.

Unlike a third of our first-year students, it seems our faculty wants to be here. Several years ago, Mary Jean Herzog assisted in a study that polled faculty attitudes about working and living at WCU. When faculty were asked to list their top three reasons for liking WCU, they said, "Location, Location, Location." It seems that many of us like being here because of its remoteness and recreational opportunities. We chose Cullowhee. Our happiness relies only partly on the people we work with, the available technology, the academic rigors of the university, and interaction with students. Much of our happiness derives from our passion for this place.

It may sound as if I'm suggesting an expansion of the Parks and Recreation curriculum or perhaps a focus on majors such as Biology or Natural Resource Management, which take advantage of our natural surroundings. That's not a bad idea. The students in these programs are probably the ones who stay because they like the area and find something to do--backpacking, hiking, kayaking, fishing, biking, and climbing. Schools near us--such as Brevard College, Montreat, and now even Southwestern Community College--have used their locationally relevant programs as a substantial tool to attract students. In fact, Montreat has over 80 students in their PRM program; that's 10% of their student body. One might argue that if these nearby schools have such strong programs then we don't need to. But perhaps we should look closely at developing a competitive Parks and Recreation program, with sufficient instructors and new equipment, because schools like Montreat might be keeping their students as a result of such programs.

The answer to retention is complex, but perhaps we have overlooked an obvious piece to the puzzle. Have we used our resources--our essential identity--as a way to draw students who want to be here? Do we attract students who come here knowing full well what this place entails? Do we market the truth of our location to incoming students? Or do we put on a quasi-urban façade in hopes that they won't discover that things get quiet after ten, that parties happen on mountainsides, or that not many people show up for the regularly scheduled bands? Do we have an identity crisis, trying to attract urban students and then hoping that they won't notice that we're not Chapel Hill or Appalachian State? Perhaps we should capitalize on the qualities that set us apart from our sister schools. Are we afraid to be explicitly Cullowhee, a quiet town, far from the convenience of the cities yet rich with cultural heritage and recreational opportunities? How about taking what some students complain of as "nothing to do" and marketing that message across our region, even our entire country--"Cullowhee, a place of learning, peace, beauty, and everything to discover?" Can we be a university that offers a number of majors focusing on the uniqueness of Western North Carolina's setting and cultural history? It would seem to be commonsensical to target big cities on recruitment crusades, but are those the students who are most likely to be happy at WCU? Would it not make more sense to focus on recruiting students from non-urban areas or recruiting students who want a non-urban experience? How do we maximize our draw based on our locale? Celebrate the uniqueness of Cullowhee, and perhaps they will come. . .and stay.

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