



Faculty Forum

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The Faculty's Role: To Govern or Advise?

In September, Rich Kucharski, WCU Legal Counsel, spoke to the Senate and explained that according to The Code of the University of North Carolina the Chancellor is ultimately and legally responsible for all aspects of the operation of our university. In the discussion and debate that followed, I sensed a degree of resignation among senators. To paraphrase one who spoke with me after the meeting, "*Governance* is the wrong word to describe the faculty role on campus. Our role is advisory." This statement was not made in despair but perhaps in the spirit of resigned matter of fact. Although I agree with the statement, I see our advisory role as an opportunity for greater, not lesser, faculty significance.

Some faculty, however, believe that our administrators have often opposed faculty improvement efforts, and these faculty bemoan the absence of what they consider a real governing role--one where faculty make and enforce policies. They recall situations in which a Chancellor or other administrator opposed something wanted by a group of faculty. Therefore, some faculty want a stronger role for faculty governance, a role that would effectively balance and possibly offset administrative opposition to faculty interests.

I agree with this understanding of our history, but I disagree with the conclusion that we ought to assert ourselves more in the policy arena. We have no choice but to acknowledge that our role is advisory, with legal authority and responsibility invested in the Chancellor. It is time to temper our quixotic tendencies and focus our collective efforts on those faculty concerns that are our responsibility.

At the August 17 General Faculty meeting I proposed that we have an opportunity to become an elite, regional, comprehensive university (ERCU). I think we can define what this means, in part, by re-designing the Faculty Senate. The consultant who worked with our recent Task Force on University Governance (TFUG) knows of no other university that has traveled as far as we have toward an understanding of appropriate governance roles for faculty, students, administration, and staff. Now we need to give substance to our understanding. To do so, we must answer the question, "How would a faculty at an ERCU organize itself so that it can effectively participate in the improvement of the institution?" Answering this question is the job of the Senate Re-structuring Task Force, and I offer the following ideas from our own faculty as a starting point.

During TFUG deliberations, Gary Smith often pointed out that governance involves more than making and enforcing policies. In his words, we are all involved in governance as we exercise "voice, vote, and influence." And this is my response to faculty who associate governance with policy-making and policy-enforcing. Even in highly bureaucratic organizations, individuals without policy roles engage in organizational governance through their voice and influence. Therefore, although I agree that our role is advisory, I do not conclude that we are not involved in university governance. Instead, we can have a significant impact on Western if we build an effective faculty governance body. For better or worse, our faculty organizational structures and processes have always been, and will continue to be, the foundation for all our improvement

efforts. If we are well organized, we are likely to achieve our goals. If we lack effective structures and processes, it is unlikely we will achieve or sustain institutional improvements.

The *Faculty Forum* piece you are reading is an example of a structure that fosters the achievement of our goals. Its purpose is to be a campus-wide forum for faculty concerns, a "voice," as it were. I am using it to present ideas about how to build more effective faculty governance at WCU. On the other hand, our university-wide election last March is an example of what happens when our organization does not fit our purposes. During the time leading up to the election, no structure was in place for candidates to explain where they stand on different issues. As a consequence, faculty lost opportunities to bring concerns to the table and to hear candidates address what is important to them. Furthermore, without an opportunity to present my positions, I had no clear mandate to direct what I was elected to do. Terry Kinnear had similar feelings after he was re-elected in 1998. If we recognize the importance of faculty voice and influence, we will build the structures and processes that will enable us to lead and participate in efforts to improve WCU. If we pit ourselves against administrative concerns, we are likely to be ineffective--our voice will be weak, and our influence will be seen as self-serving. The point is that we can organize ourselves better, and an improved organization begins with a vision for exercising our voice and influence to benefit the university.

Members of the Task Force on University Governance also developed ten "Standards of Good Governance" (I call them principles of good governance). I propose that our Senate borrow heavily from the university governance standards, which address the same organizational questions as those confronting the Senate--Who should be included? Which are our domains of responsibility? What should our structures look like? What procedures will enable us to be effective and efficient?

A third piece of work that can inform the work of the Senate task force is a thought-provoking paper published in 1991 by Bruce Henderson and Bill Kane. They point out that the conflict that simmers within the faculties of regional, comprehensive universities may have its roots in a misunderstanding of the mission of our university classification. In their paper they describe the desires of some faculty to emulate the culture of Research I institutions and the desires of others to emulate the culture of the liberal arts college. Our WCU faculty culture reflects some of this same conflict, and addressing it directly might be the first step toward becoming an ERCU--an institution that blends the best elements of the other classifications.

In conclusion, our review of faculty governance is an opportunity to take hold of our responsibilities in new ways. Can we establish faculty structures and processes that are models of effectiveness for regional comprehensive universities? Because of the work already completed, I believe we are well on our way. Before we move further, though, I want all faculty to see the direction we are taking and to have the opportunity to participate in our re-structuring effort. If you have any ideas you want to share, or if you are interested in becoming part of the Senate Re-structuring Task Force, simply contact me or Roger Higgs, chair of our Re-structuring Task Force.

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