



# Faculty Forum

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

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## Some Thoughts Regarding Retention

At the end of the 2001 Fall semester, 20% of WCU first-time freshmen had a GPA below 2.0--the minimum required to graduate. About 12% of our freshman class were put on academic probation and 7% were suspended. But moderately poor academic performance is not an insurmountable problem for individuals who are at the end of their freshman year. After all, they have roughly six more semesters to mend their ways. However, the problem looms respectively larger for sophomores and juniors as they have fewer chances to "make the grade." Seniors have essentially run out of time.

This illustrates a relationship that most college faculty members are aware of--the more hours a student has earned, the harder it is for him or her to increase his or her GPA. Take the extreme case of Hypothetical John, a senior at Southern U, who shows up at the office of his advisor, Professor Smith, with his application for graduation in hand. The good news is that John has completed 112 credit hours and is eagerly looking forward to a May graduation and a quick celebratory trip to Cancun before taking his rightful position as a supervisor in his dad's landscape architecture business. The bad news is that it will be impossible for John to graduate in May. After looking over John's transcript, Smith frowns and notes that John did not do well last semester. Smith does a little quick arithmetic and determines that in his 16 remaining hours, it is mathematically impossible for John to raise his GPA to a 2.0. Thus, come May, it is more likely that John will be mowing lawns for his dad than sipping margaritas on a Mexican beach--even if he has a stellar final semester.

Could this happen here? The answer is probably not. A university's probation/suspension policy can be thought of as how deep a hole of academic difficulties should we allow a student to dig him or her self into and still have a reasonable prospect of "refilling it," that is, of recovering academically in time for graduation. In John's case, the university failed him by letting him dig a hole that he had no possibility of filling.

John would probably have been protected at WCU because of our requirement that a student's minimum GPA increases as the number of hours he or she has completed increases. This policy is outlined on page 56 of the undergraduate catalog, which includes a table for determining minimum acceptable GPA's. For example, according to the table, to stay at Western a student needs a GPA of .999 at the end of his or her freshman year, 1.45 at the end of his or her sophomore year, and 1.82 at the end of his or her junior year. At WCU, John would probably have been put on probation and, eventually, suspended long before his senior year.

The WCU suspension policy is rigorous--particularly for first semester freshmen. Relaxing this policy would, at least in the short run, increase our retention rate, which, as we all know, is near the bottom of UNC system universities. Because our retention rate is often compared with our 14 sister schools (excluding the School of the Arts), it is instructive to make a careful cross-campus comparison of academic suspension policies. Surprisingly, this analysis reveals that WCU has some of the most stringent suspension criteria in the North Carolina system. For example,

1. WCU is nearly alone in our policy of suspending freshmen after a single semester. (Indeed, at seven of the UNC system schools, the minimum GPA requirement does not start until the student has completed at least 24 hours.)
2. To continue past the freshman year (29 hours), a WCU student needs a GPA of 1.45. Only four other universities in the system have a required GPA this high early in the student's career.
3. To continue past the sophomore year, a WCU student needs a GPA of 1.82. Only one other school requires a GPA this high.

In short, mathematically, it is easier to flunk out of WCU than almost any other university in the UNC system. That is, the GPA "bar" is higher at WCU than it is at ASU, UNC-A, NC State, and Chapel Hill.

There are two primary reasons why students don't return to WCU. Some don't come back because they don't want to; others don't come back because we don't let them. Our retention rate would instantly improve if we simply lowered our minimum GPA requirements for freshmen to match those of other UNC system schools.

Is this a good idea? I think not. Indeed, I believe that WCU's probation/suspension policy is, in fact, superior to that of most of our sister institutions. Among its strengths are: (a) it gives a clear definition of good academic standing; (b) it identifies early in their college careers the students who have academic problems; (c) it leads students experiencing academic difficulty back to good standing in an incremental, progressive, and systematic fashion; and (d) it has aspects of forgiveness that serve as an incentive and help errant students to recover good academic standing. While lowering the GPA requirement might increase our retention ranking, ultimately we would not be doing our students any favors.

Currently, the Council on Student Affairs is proposing changes in our probation/suspension policy that would alter it to more resemble the policies of our sister institutions. In a single, bold move, we can make our retention numbers look better. Some might call it creative accounting, but I call it a mistake. We already have a fine, if stringent probation/suspension policy. When the Council's proposals go before the Faculty Senate for approval, these issues should be carefully weighed.

While I support the effort to help freshmen return to good academic standing through our retention /suspension policy, I hope that our basic policy is not changed. One standard that remains high at WCU is our GPA requirement. While our GPA bar may be higher than that at many other institutions, it meets the needs of a variety of stakeholders, including not only the students but also their parents, state taxpayers, and the university's faculty. To lower our retention standards now would be a mistake.

***Ralph Willis, Mathematics, and anonymous others***

*The opinions printed here belong solely to the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the editorial staff or of the Faculty Center. If you would like to respond, e-mail Nienhuis by the 8th of the month.*