



Faculty Forum

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Catamount Syndrome

Western has a problem that many believe is real: we aren't good at attracting and keeping students or faculty. Let's call it the Catamount Syndrome. A syndrome differs from an illness in that illnesses have clear causes and cures. A syndrome--chronic fatigue syndrome, for example--is a condition that experts cannot blame on a single cause. Until recently, few believed chronic fatigue was real. People with its symptoms were ignored, patronized as hypochondriacs, or sent to specialists who treated isolated symptoms. Only when doctors guessed that the condition might have several distinct causes--thyroid disorders, yeast growth, and malnutrition, to name a few--did they make headway. However, to think like the patient, a doctor requires these leaps of faith:

- Assuming, for the moment, that the patient is not the problem
- Listening carefully to all symptoms instead of recording only those that fit the diagnosis
- Asking the patients themselves instead of consulting specialists
- Attacking all the symptoms at once without necessarily linking them to a single cause
- Trusting, when possible, the body's ability to heal itself and giving it tools to heal itself

I use a syndrome analogy to suggest how we should think about our retention problems and what we should do about them. First, I'll perfect my analogy, in which we (faculty, staff, and students) are the body, administrators are doctors, and consultants are specialists.

- We've been told that we, the faculty, are the problem. Ignoring evidence from student surveys, administrators blamed poor retention on "bad grading." Their remedy: curtailing academic freedom by regulating grading practices.
- Our "doctors" began with a diagnosis and selected symptoms to fit. Hoping to de-emphasize our rural location, this university looked for ways to heighten its urban profile by publicizing "wired" classes, investing in jazz instead of bluegrass, discouraging "green" themes, and using terms like "informatics." Rather than building programs that attract good students who like it here--faculty offspring, older students, and outdoor enthusiasts--they tried to pave paradise, spinning this hamlet as the next Avenue of the Americas.
- Specialists and consultants arrived to explain our woes while we ignored our own experts. Though Western asks students why they leave, we don't believe their answers or we just don't like them. My technical writing students periodically send proposals to administrators examining everything from climbing walls and bar shuttles to dual enrollment programs. To my knowledge, no administrator has tried to act on any of these proposals.
- Though our problems are connected, we've treated them separately. We defer to authority when we ought to listen to each other, spending hours on task forces that attack part of the problem. While a college committee labored to correct salary inequities, a gold-chip senate task force announced that none exist. While Program Review struggled to free positions by cutting programs, no one counted long-vacant positions, administrative "upgrades," or phased retirement vacancies we could easily combine. (Vacant positions provide a huge source of

flexible revenue, and part-time faculty come cheap, so since 1995 the ratio of untenured to tenurable faculty in lower division courses has doubled.) And it's obvious we didn't consult art faculty about the bat-winged stationery.

- No one trusts our opinions or experience. Our task forces and committees are structured not to foster dialog but to enforce consensus. A huge administrative presence sways some committees. For example, recent "capital construction" plans solicited our input and then ignored it (though the 22-person Master Planning Task Force did include three faculty and three students). Other committees' tasks are scripted in advance. I spent my only day on a salary equity task force hearing why market and merit inequities were "beyond our scope." Another task force was "already studying" percentage raises and merit definitions, so we couldn't discuss those either. Before the meeting ended, some had already reached the only conclusion in our power: inequities are both inevitable and imaginary.

If I'm right, faculty are depressed because we feel helpless. Our mouths move but no sound comes out. I don't think our administrators conspire to silence us. If we are manipulated, it's because, to continue with my syndrome analogy, we defer to anyone wearing a lab coat.

People of goodwill disagree. In hierarchical models, doctors decide which solution is correct. The cure for a syndrome, however, combines many partial answers that *work their way up from below*. To find what ails Western, we should ask those who know, including custodians who know how we live and secretaries who know how we work. We should assume debate is healthy, though consensus is pretty. And we should let qualified people—not just the *same old people*--try out their ideas. Since it's my article, here are some of mine:

- Employ fewer administrators. Too many "men in black" mire us in red tape when we need to act creatively, and they can't always afford dissent.
- Make Western faculty-friendly. Create jobs for faculty spouses so our stationery doesn't have to say, "Power your mind or save your marriage." Give *all* our employees benefits and a living wage.
- Make Western student-friendly. Hire far more student support. Solicit and use student ideas.
- Create a real service learning program tied to majors. Our community is long on need and short on services. Our multi-talented students could write grants, tutor ESL students, or design business plans. Useful work might keep students here while building their resumes.
- Do something, anything, to get people arguing--even if it means using every scrap of Western's purple stationery to construct a giant penis.

PMS sufferers were once as credible as alien abductees. Medical schools taught doctors they knew better, until believing in PMS grew less important than making it go away. Until we hear new ideas, we won't hear useful ones, and if we start by saying what we can't do, we won't hear anything at all. Good teaching is a tightrope between lecturing and listening, and we walk it our whole lives. Administrators are teachers too. They can get the hang of it.

Mary Adams, English

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