



# Faculty Forum

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

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

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## **The Appalachian Theme is Just Right for Western**

In his speech at the fall General Faculty Meeting, Chancellor Bardo called for faculty to consider themes or directions that would be "germane" and "appropriate" for Western Carolina University in the coming years. He mentioned five suggestions that had been brought to him "through the course of the summer" and three of the five involved our regional character. Over the summer, faculty suggested emphases on Appalachian culture, on our mountain environment, and on regional economic diversification; these all imply that Western ought to adopt an Appalachian theme to help focus its educational mission within the UNC system (the other two suggestions were teacher education and gerontology). These three Appalachian emphases, part of an overall Appalachian theme, would inspire and energize our whole curriculum--from the humanities, social sciences, and arts to hard sciences, environmental science, health science, economics, business, and technology. Chancellor Bardo warned us that the theme we choose should not be too broad or too narrow. I like to think that the Appalachian theme is just right for WCU.

With the Appalachian focus, we can distinguish WCU from all the other universities in the UNC system. This focus could be the special way that WCU is known and recognized not only in North Carolina but throughout the Southeast and even the nation at large. The importance of distinguishing ourselves in some area was raised in the Paulien Report a few years ago, and Russ Lea from General Administration spoke to the same issue in a meeting on our campus this summer. Last year Brian Railsback and Gordon Mercer generated considerable campus discussion along these lines by suggesting that WCU become known as "the green campus." The question of how WCU will distinguish or "position" itself is a crucial one because our choice of theme will probably have significant ramifications on how the university will grow in the years to come.

The new Hunter Library Web site has already adopted an Appalachian theme. The revolving graphics on the right side of the library web page feature photos of Horace Kephart, George Masa, Quill Rose, Nimrod Jarrett Smith, Josefina Niggli, and Sue Ellen Bridgers. However, the annual student recruitment tour from the Admissions Office has not gone Appalachian. The imitation CD cover that advertises the eight-stop, 2002 recruitment tour features a flying catmount mascot in a Superman shirt, holding a WCU flag as he charges through the purple background. The title of the "CD" and the epithet for the tour is "Power Charged" and this tour is apparently "back by popular demand." The prospective students are invited to "Experience the Power that one evening can have on your future." It may be unreasonable to expect the Appalachian theme to serve as a high-powered marketing tool, but what do we gain by identifying Western with popular entertainment?

Some have suggested that WCU has a potential "gold mine" with our Cherokee Studies program, but my impression is that the program does not have the visibility that it deserves. The newly-established Parris Distinguished Professorship in Appalachian Cultural Studies would be good for WCU even on its own merit, but let's do more than simply establish the professorship; let's use the gift of the Parris estate as a pivotal moment for WCU. Western Carolina has one of the richest musical heritages in the United States, and it has one of the most beautiful physical locations in the world. While high school students might not care about the banjo styles of Jackson

County, many of them would be attracted to the aesthetic and recreational opportunities that our location affords. There are a lot of 18 year olds sweating in featureless Charlotte suburbs who would be very attracted to a university in which they can expect great teachers, state of the art technology, AND cool mountain air and world-class mountain biking 10 minutes from their residence hall. Now is the time to redefine WCU as more than just a generic regional comprehensive university or "party school."

How might a Southern Appalachian theme at WCU be implemented? We already have an Appalachian Studies Minor. It is listed in the catalog as an "Arts and Sciences Interdisciplinary Program." A few years ago this program was created with great enthusiasm and energy, but the program seems to have lost its momentum. We already have the organizational structure in place to accommodate this theme; all we need to do is reenergize our enthusiasm for it.

There is a retention angle to this proposal. Some of our current students come to WCU and leave after a year because they simply don't "connect" with the region. These are the students who are likely to complain that "there's nothing to do in Cullowhee." An aggressive marketing campaign could attract students to WCU who specifically want to study some aspect of the southern Appalachian heritage. Majors such as Natural Resources Management and Parks and Recreation Management attract students who are already attached to the region, and I have heard that these programs have high retention rates. We should try to attract more students who have a natural affinity for the area and who would more likely want to stay in Cullowhee for four years. Students who come to WCU because of our location are much more likely to stay than those who come in spite of it.

Perhaps the campus community will not agree that an emphasis on Southern Appalachia is the best way to distinguish WCU, but I say give Doc Watson an honorary Doctorate and see how it plays. That would be a real statement about our distinctive values.

**Charles Wallis, Mathematics and Computer Science, with thanks to other faculty who contributed significantly to this piece**

*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.*