



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

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A Call for a Forum on the Faculty Forum

Once upon a time in these mountains in October, 1988, the first issue of the *Faculty Forum*, as a publication of the then newly created Coulter Faculty Center, was written and published by Faculty Fellow, Terry Nienhuis, who said that the main goal of the *Forum* would be "to spark a lively dialogue about college teaching" through a faculty opinion piece each month and subsequent faculty responses to it published in *Notes & Quotes*.

After fifteen years of monthly publication during the academic year, the *Forum* and its mid-month cousin, *Notes & Quotes*, continue to be published and distributed to faculty and are available on the Center's web site. Recently, additional Faculty Center publications have started that include the *Renaissance of Teaching & Learning Booklet Series* (by WCU faculty), *MountainRise* (an ejournal on the scholarship of teaching & learning with articles by WCU faculty) and *The Buzzard's Roost Road Review* (quarterly newsletter of the Faculty Center). The purpose of this configuration of publications is for faculty to engage with colleagues about teaching and learning.

Through the years the *Faculty Forum* has been a main stimulus for campus-wide discussions and debates. The topics have been varied and have sometimes evoked many passionate responses. That fulfilled the original purpose of the *Forum*.

However, in recent years fewer responses are being made to the *Forum* pieces. There have been two peak periods when *Forum* essays stimulated responses: the initial period from 1989 to 1991 and 1996 to 1999. Since 1999 there have been only a few *Forum* pieces that have generated many responses. And some submissions have addressed topics that may not have the direct connection with teaching and learning that was part of the original mandate in 1988. The 15th year mark may be a propitious time to ask for your help in rethinking the purpose of the *Faculty Forum*.

"Forum" means an open area or public square in a town or location where important issues can be discussed freely. To call the publication the *Faculty Forum* says that it is for open discussion by and for faculty. Topics in the *Forum* can be controversial and that can help stir conversation. The only constraints are that the discussions be civil and that the topics focus directly upon some aspect of college teaching and learning. As the work of the Faculty Center is in the process of being reexamined and sometimes transformed, this re-examination of the *Forum* fits into that process. **We want to hear what you think the purpose of the *Forum* should be.** Some basic questions come to mind:

- Should the *Forum* continue? Why or why not?
- What about topics not directly related to teaching and learning but that concern faculty? Should there be a separate publication produced by faculty for such issues that lie outside the teaching and learning mission of the Faculty Center?
- Do you read the *Forum* when it comes to your mailbox? Why or why not?

- What topics would you like to see in the *Forum*? Would you consider writing a piece for the *Forum* about one such topic that is important for you?
- Do you read *Notes & Quotes*? Why or why not?

The *Forum* has been around so long now that its appearance is a campus ritual and it has developed its own history marked by certain benchmark pieces. In a way, the *Forum* has become part of the *mythos* of WCU, but like any good and living story, it can not be fossilized, or ignored, and still retain its vision. The *Forum* can be a dynamic medium.

- Does grade inflation exist at WCU?
- Lecturing is still dominant, but is it outdated or does it retain value?
- Can educational technologies actually improve learning or not?
- What is "good" teaching and how can it be evaluated? What is "good" learning and how can it be assessed?
- Are numerical student evaluations valid or not?
- Is one's teaching a private matter, a community event, or both?
- Is there fear for students and faculty in changing approaches to teaching and learning, even if the change is for the better?
- How can departments become centers of teaching and learning excellence?
- What should the Faculty Center be and what should it be doing?
- Do faculty have an ethical obligation to professional development as teachers?
- What are the reasons for and results of having a profession (college teaching) where most faculty are not actually trained to teach nor have they researched human learning?
- What would have to happen for a full renaissance of teaching and learning to occur?

In the last *Forum* of that first year, 1988-1989, Terry said that "One of William Blake's proverbs says, 'you never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough.' Is it possible to have too much dialogue? Is it possible to have too much community spirit? Is it possible to care too much about teaching excellence? Write us today. If the *Forum* hasn't voiced your concern, it must be because we haven't heard from you. Give us an opinion about some aspect of the teaching life at WCU. Tell us what works in your classroom. Tell us what you see as the problems confronting us as teachers. The campus community is waiting to hear from you."

The *Forum* is about faculty wanting to discover, express, apply, and question truths about teaching and learning. Some might call that sacred work. A Russian proverb says "one word of truth outweighs the whole world." If so, the goal of the *Forum* has been a heavy one.

As its 16th year approaches, tell us your vision for the future of the *Faculty Forum*. **Send your responses to this issue to *Forum* editor, Terry Nienhuis, by April 7th** so he can include them in the mid-April issue of *Notes & Quotes*. Not to respond at all does not help us all.

Alan Altany, Director, Coulter Faculty Center

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.