



# Faculty Forum

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

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 16, No. 1

September 1, 2003

## **What's It Like To Be New At Western?**

At the General Faculty Meeting on August 14, Chancellor Bardo told us that this year's enormous increase in the number of freshmen has been mirrored by a huge growth in new faculty—this year we have 63 new faculty, nearly 16% of our faculty total. And this process may continue. The Chancellor estimates that we may reach 10,000 students by 2009. The Vice-Chancellor's office tells us that since 1996, new teachers have replaced two-thirds of our faculty. Thus, in 2003, many of us are relatively new at Western. What is it like to be new at WCU? This is a potentially crucial issue for understanding our teaching and learning environment because all these new people are joining and shaping our academic community. What kind of community have they joined? What kind of community are they shaping? What is their initial experience like? Is their initial experience helping to build the kind of community we seek? What follows is a partial description of what it's like to be new at Western. I have compiled comments from a dozen faculty who have joined us within the last few years. I want to thank all of them for their help and I invite you to add your observations and comments.

- Many new faculty have an initial and often persistent feeling that their anxieties, confusions, and sense of being "swamped" are unique to them, labelling them as deficient or inefficient in some way. The descriptions of sixty-hour weeks were common. The fact, of course, is that nearly everyone is short on time, and new faculty are often reassured by hearing this. For example, we all know that the anxieties about tenure and promotion are real and widespread. If you know new faculty members, assure them that you are struggling or have struggled with many of the same issues that now plague them.
- Most new faculty gain considerable solace in their first year from many aspects of the New Faculty Orientation Program—where they attend, as a group, numerous sessions designed to introduce them gradually to their new academic environment. However, many report that the program's "bonding" and informational values are seriously undercut by the intensity and duration of the sessions. A number of faculty members reported that they were not able to prepare sufficiently for their classes because of the onslaught of orientation meetings. In addition, most felt pressured to attend new faculty orientation and worried that skipping sessions might risk tenure or promotion. The solution may be simple: give orientation leaders your honest feedback because they definitely want the program to work effectively.
- Many new faculty join the UFO (Untenured Faculty Organization) and/or the University Club as ways of immediately finding faculty friends and rich social activities. One faculty member simply advised new faculty to "have a party and invite people."
- Many new faculty join the Mentoring Program and some report astounding value in the experience. Others report that the informal mentoring of departmental colleagues (and department secretaries) is even more valuable. One respondent said she was especially relieved when a senior colleague said that it was okay to focus on her teaching in her first year, that easing into her research and publication agenda was very common. So, if you are

new, don't hesitate to join the Mentoring Program or to ask questions of a departmental colleague. If you have been at WCU for awhile, make yourself available to new faculty.

- Some new faculty were surprised to discover that they not only had to present their subject to students but also had to teach their students how to learn it.
- One faculty member said that she felt reassured when she realized that proceeding by "trial and error" was a normal process in teaching, that she didn't have to be perfect in her first attempts. She still wondered how long it would take to see great improvement in results.
- Some said they were reassured when they learned that a disappointing class or even a disappointing course can be part of a normal process. Such teaching experiences don't necessarily mean the teachers are seriously deficient. Sometimes a strange alchemy is at work in the college classroom and temporary failures are to be expected.
- One respondent reported feeling shy about applying for an internal grant in her first year, thinking that it might seem presumptuous to more experienced faculty. But our colleague overcame her shyness, applied, and was successful, suggesting that first-year status might even be an advantage rather than a liability, all else being equal.
- Several respondents would remind this year's new faculty that they may have problems that require referring students to various student support services.
- One respondent advised: "Connect with your students; everything else will fall in place."
- A number of new faculty suggested that creating an instructional web site was time and effort enjoyably well spent. Laura Chapman in the Faculty Center "Sandbox" is the person to contact for expert guidance.
- For those faculty who have to do academic advising in their first year, one respondent suggested that becoming very familiar with the undergraduate catalogue and the student handbook would greatly facilitate this work.
- One respondent wanted to remind new faculty that they shouldn't feel guilty about finally ending a long and grueling day. "Chill out and go home," she says; "remember to have fun." She observes that with new faculty "sometimes it's hard to realize that you're not a graduate student any more."

These are some of the observations of our new faculty. Do they match your experiences? Is there anything important that we have left out? What information or advice do you feel that you needed but were not given when you were new at Western? What was the most helpful information or advice that you received in your first year? How can we better welcome our new faculty? If you have observations or opinions on this issue, send them to me at the Faculty Center by Monday, September 8. We will print your responses in the September 15 issue of notes & quotes and the dialogue will help make Western a more effective teaching and learning community.

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*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.*