



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

Vol. 16, No. 2

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

October 1, 2003

Reaching Audiences Near and Far

A football coach has many constituencies, but at kickoff of the season opener he is probably focusing attention on the action on the field. At the kickoff of the academic semester it's rational to focus most of our teaching energy on our "field"—the classroom. But whether new to Western's faculty or an old hand, it is useful to consider that a university professor has other constituencies as well.

A teacher's first audience, of course, is students. But of additional concern is university administration and the public image that the governance of a university engenders. The wider, if variable, audience consists of general system administration, accrediting bodies, and, ultimately, the general assembly and the citizens of North Carolina. A bit broad-scoped for the semester kickoff? Perhaps. But the pragmatic use of some familiar instruments can address concerns of both our immediate and less proximate audiences.

This is worth considering because of some of the things our wider audience has been saying about us lately. Excluding the dozens of negative articles on recent tuition increases, a few samplers:

On its current Website, the Pew Charitable Trusts observes:

Why do fewer than half the students who begin college in this country graduate five years later with a bachelor's degree? When students do graduate, troubling questions are being asked about how much students have learned. Employers report that a surprising number of new graduates do not have the skills needed to compete in today's competitive market. ... Systematic change is likely to remain elusive until higher education is motivated to make the [necessary] changes.

In the widely read 'Point of View' column on the back page of the July 25 Chronicle Review the author bemoans a substantial reduction in generosity of charitable foundations supporting higher education. She cites the lack of common goals for innovation in academe, little systemic innovation, and few measurable results as probable reasons, and she observes that "if higher education is serious about embracing new ideas, we will need to become as creative in our administrative and organizational systems—in areas like faculty rewards and operational technology—as we are in the classroom. Our systems cannot remain static on the one hand and embrace innovation on the other."

And in the current issue of AAUP's Academe, authors of an article titled "The New Generation of American Scholars" ask the question, "Are [academic] departments obsolete?" and declare that "the quest for new kinds of knowledge tests disciplinary and departmental boundaries. To foster this pursuit, institutions need to rethink traditional ideas about faculty identity and support."

And these quotes are from academic-*friendly* sources.

One logical response of faculty is to participate in faculty governance deliberations. Nationally, and perhaps in North Carolina, trends towards faculty disempowerment and the commodification of education are serious concerns. But governance issues aside, there are practical ways to foster student learning while addressing wider audience concerns. Here are three:

Use the “CC” (Composition Conditional) Grade. According to the WCU catalog, “A student whose written work in any course fails to meet acceptable standards will be assigned a [CC] mark by the instructor on the final grade report.” Students who receive two CC grades are required to pass English 300 before becoming eligible for graduation. This is an innovative and constructive tool, especially when one considers that potential employers rank communication skills at or near the top of applicant qualification surveys. Faculty who attend career fairs are likely to hear a common plea among potential employers: “Send us somebody who can write!”

And yet, according to the WCU Registrar’s office, in the recent spring semester only 24 of 500 faculty issued a CC grade, or less than 5%. Only 71 CC grades were issued in total; so, assuming no duplications, about 1 for every 85 undergraduate students. One conclusion is that Western students write well. But a more likely explanation is that too few faculty are taking advantage of this important evaluative tool. When it is deserved, consider issuing a CC to students on final grade reports—and make it clear on your syllabus that you reserve that option. Future employers of Western graduates will thank you.

Use Course-Objectives Matrix. All syllabi state course objectives; but it is helpful to show how various course readings and assignments support the course’s stated objectives. This task can be accomplished by constructing a course-objectives matrix. For example, make clear which assignments help fulfill university goals of engendering “...the ability to think critically, to communicate effectively, to identify and resolve problems reflectively, and to use information and technology responsibly.” Relating course objectives to demands from a relevant accrediting body might also be appropriate. Showing how a course contributes to larger goals can make small but important contributions towards institutional efforts concerning program assessment and educational mission.

Use Technology. David Noble, Neil Postman and other critics of educational technology raise interesting points. But the advantages of instructional technology seem incontrovertible as a resource base, and for facilitating time- and place-independent learning. The World Wide Web provides links to real entities addressing contemporary, real-world problems and issues. If you are not comfortable putting up your own stand-alone Web site, try WebCT. This WCU-supported software facilitates teamwork, consolidates resources, provides access from anywhere, supplies functional e-mail addresses, and can help break down disciplinary boundaries.

Ideally, these elementary tactics will improve teaching, course evaluations, and our public image. Pragmatically, department heads will notice these efforts, as will tenure and promotion committees. Although faculty efforts alone cannot resolve the systemic problems of higher education, the relatively small steps suggested above can make a positive impact—both on and off the field.

Gary H. Jones, Computer Information Systems and Economics

The opinions printed here belong solely to the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the editorial staff or the Faculty Center. If you would like to respond, email Alan Altany by October 8th.