



# Faculty Forum

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

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

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## **Freshmen and the Faculty Who Teach Them Need More Support**

When a colleague tells us that his or her classes consist primarily of freshmen, many of us respond with either pity or dismissal. Some faculty even consider freshmen the “unwashed horde” of WCU and think that teaching them day after day can only be regarded as drudgery. Don't all teachers yearn for the opportunity to enlighten *real* students in the major? No. I love teaching freshmen. They are, without question, the most important students on this campus, and more people need to start thinking as I do if Western's commitment to responsible growth and retention is to have any impact or success. Instead of throwing up our hands at the prospect of having to teach freshmen, we should be fighting over who gets the *privilege*.

Traditionally, those at the bottom of the teaching pyramid—the lecturers and “visiting” instructors—have shouldered most of the First Year load. This, I believe, is mostly as it should be; senior faculty should spend more of their time and energy on students in the major. Lecturers and visiting instructors, hereafter “First Year Faculty” or FYF, should remain on the front lines and act as a kind of infantry. The first year of college creates much confusion for students, and FYF have the unique and arduous task of fighting through this chaos and steering freshmen toward their goals and their identities. Unfortunately, both First Year students and faculty suffer at the bottom of a caste system that prevents their receiving much support in this battle.

We have had a lot of good news about teaching freshmen lately. Recent improvements include the standardization of lectureships so that most FYF now receive medical and retirement benefits, and the Faculty Center has sponsored two activities this year that focused on teaching freshmen—the Summer Institute for Teaching and Learning and a Faculty Learning Community on Teaching First Year Students. Other news and developments in the First Year battle include the reintroduction of Learning Communities (a successful experiment that will expand this fall) and the abiding and growing awareness by all of the outstanding quality of instruction at Western.

But the battle rages on, and the fact remains that most FYF are under-prepared and ill equipped to handle the challenges we face. First Year courses are extremely labor intensive; the classes are large, and the grading is tedious. These classes are also repetitive, especially when an instructor teaches multiple sections of the same course. In addition, FYF devote our few spare moments to scholarship, and though few FYF are required to serve on committees, most of us choose to do so once we realize that questions which directly affect what we teach are being decided without our input.

Regardless of their level of involvement outside the classroom, FYF hear constant reminders about retention, growth rates, and the need for faculty involvement. We feel this pressure very keenly, and often feel guilty that we cannot do as much as senior faculty. With all



this on our minds, the fact that we actually manage to *educate* anyone could be considered a small miracle—one accomplished with a fistful of cheery determination, twelve feet of shared office space, fourteen hundred bucks a month after taxes, and joint custody of a computer assembled during the Pleistocene Era.

Every teacher on campus could lodge similar complaints about the pressures of the job, regardless of how much we're paid or how lofty our titles may be. My purpose in reminding faculty and administrators about the First Year teaching experience lies in raising awareness about our *students*. Any discussion regarding faculty should be student-focused.

The tendency to disregard freshmen and to cram them into classes taught by harried, overworked FYF can only be attributed to a lack of concern or respect for the First Year student. We assume that advisors, housing staff, and FYF will scrub behind freshmen's ears and that only when these students select a major or begin to take upper level courses will they be worth our time. But if a department doesn't have as many majors as it would like or if faculty want to bemoan the apathy of the student body in general, they cannot do so without admitting that they have little or no commitment to actively and enthusiastically participating in the First Year experience. First Year students will feel no safety with and no affection for their education without encouragement and a sense that this institution has a cohesive plan for them. If we fail in this plan, we can expect high transfer rates, plenty of empty stares in the classroom, and a traffic jam on I-40 every Friday afternoon.

If Western truly wants to improve retention and increase enrollment *responsibly*, the experience of FYF needs to be addressed in accordance with the experience of freshmen. I am certain that my wide-eyed freshmen would be a lot happier and more productive if their professors weren't too overwhelmed themselves to identify their students' needs.

I don't just want smaller classes, higher pay, and a comfier office chair. If all three of those wishes were granted, I would initially be much happier to teach back-to-back sections of English 101, but I would quickly realize that in spite of my best efforts, I still don't always know how to deal with the myriad social and academic factors on campus that affect freshman performance. Most upper-division faculty do not have a clear understanding of how to prepare students to emerge from the turmoil of their first year because we neglect to set clear goals for the lower-level courses being taught in our departments or to effectively equip and entuse the people teaching them.

If WCU provided FYF with better supplies and equipment, continued the fair examination of salaries and benefits, and actively sought to represent First Year instructors in the Faculty Senate, every student and university employee would benefit. We must make a concerted effort to appreciate and share with First Year Faculty and to delight in and eagerly await the arrival of every freshman class. Join our Faculty Learning Community this summer or fall and help us and WCU meet these challenges. Contact Alan Altany in the Faculty Center to express your interest in this noble work.

**Leah Hampton, English (and the Faculty Learning Community on Teaching First Year Students)**

*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.*