



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

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“Contingent Faculty —Paupers of the Times”

This fall we were all informed that WCU may have to make budgetary cuts of 7 to 8% across the board for the 2009/10 school year. That being so, one imagines everything, from the highest salary to the smallest of office supplies being cut back to an 8% reduction. The idea being, “We are all in this together we can all cut back until things normalize.”

Immediately the discussion turned to cutting contingent faculty – the rationale: “that is why they are *contingent* – these positions are buffers for difficult years.” It is hard to understand a system that would be cutting people from the budget in one breath and sending out memos in the next saying there is money to spend for supplies, or books, “please send in your requests.”

I and most of my colleagues view this as inhumane.

Since this announcement, in various departments across campus, contingent faculty have been told their positions most likely will be cut, then told that the cuts may not be as deep as first expected, causing bewilderment and despair among those affected by these indelicate methods of contending with an uncertain budget. Other departments have let out the word that all adjunct faculty will be cut. Even this semester some adjuncts have had as much as a two-third reduction in their course load which means a two-third reduction in pay.

Reality – Most contingent faculty are the instructors who generally teach some of the most demanding classes for the lowest pay. Why do they sign on?

1. Some need the experience.
2. Some prefer the challenges and scholarship of teaching to the rigors of the tenure track.
3. Some have found that even with their terminal degrees the market is just too competitive to land a tenure track position and have managed a way to live on the meager salary these positions pay, often supplementing with additional work.
4. Most contingent faculty find their work to be intrinsically rewarding knowing they are making a difference in the next generation, and though not satisfied with the low pay, are reconciled to it
5. Many are led to believe that their extra work in their various departments, (work not required of them but certainly encouraged), gets noticed and they will be considered if a fulltime position opens in the department, (though generally with time they come to realize this is mostly mythical).
6. Lastly, some are retired or semi-retired and want to teach at WCU part-time because they have a strong emotional attachment to the university, love to teach, and use the scanty

salary as a retirement supplement. These faculty bring a rich and diverse background to the classroom that younger faculty may not possess.

Most contingent faculty teach the foundational courses within a department, courses that lay the ground work for the student's future success in their major. It seems ludicrous to cut the budget in the area where the university gets high quality work from highly qualified faculty *at more than a bargain rate*. It is a heartless choice as well. Many contingent faculty members have moved here for their positions and have acquired home mortgages. Many are the sole bread earners in their homes. Many barely make ends meet on their existing wages, would be more than happy to have a better position, are more than qualified but cannot find work. These positions are filled by people institutions of higher learning brought into their advance degree programs and gave high hopes for their career futures. However, in today's climate they have become the paupers of the university system, generally in financial debt to the system that offered them what have become, nearly useless terminal degrees. Terminating their positions or reducing them further is unconscionable!

What about the student? Consider the impact on the quality of education if these positions are eliminated especially when, as the chancellor just reported, applications are up for the fall: Overloaded classrooms. Overuse of graduate students as instructors – students lacking in experience, are often not mentored, yet teach foundational classes. For the student, they must accept poor quality instruction while their tuitions continue to soar.

Consider another alternative that was recently highlighted on ABC News. The superintendent of the Oxford Hills school district in Maine, given the difficult task of cutting its budget, chiseled away as much as he could but still fell short of the mandated reduction. The only solution was to terminate seven teachers. The superintendent, Mark Eastman, along with Jim Thornton, president of the teacher's union, sought the higher road. They constructed a letter asking each person on payroll from administration to teachers to janitors, to consider giving up *one day's pay* during the remainder of the school year. They quoted President Obama, who commended, "the selflessness of workers who would rather cut their hours than see a friend lose their job... (to) see us through our darkest hours." Over 60% responded in the affirmative and they were able to meet the budgetary demands.

If we, at centers of higher learning, don't lead with a standard that shows a level of enlightenment when it comes to the handling of the lives of our co-workers during difficult times, who will lead us to a better path? Wall Street? Capitol Hill?

If an 8% cut were truly across the board from salaries to office supplies, the entire university could carry on, though a bit pinched, and each person could keep his/her job, each family could keep their home, and this university could set a standard that says, "though these times are tough, together we will get through, but we will not allow our faithful workers to lose their jobs because of circumstances that they had no hand in bringing about."

Norma Smith
Visiting Part Time Instructor
Art & Design

Coulter Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

Responses to the February Issue of the Faculty Forum

Graduate Assistants: A Manifesto
By Dr. Laura Cruz and Dr. Scott Higgins

Barbara Eblen

I can completely understand why graduate students are dissatisfied with their training in soft skills. Even though they sit in on lectures with their mentors the mentor doesn't sit in on their classes to offer evaluation and or instruction.

Vittal S. Anantatmula

Laura and Scott:

I can relate to what is written in your article. I carefully selected bright students and appointed them as graduate students semester after semester for 8 years for my program faculty at my previous institution. I used to hold meetings with all the graduate students every semester to get feedback. I heard similar views from them. Graduate students were often used for grading purposes instead of research work for which they were appointed in the first place. Other than financial gains including tuition credit, graduate assistantship did not provide a learning opportunity.

Thanks for sharing this article.

Regards
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Barbara Hardie

Graduate assistants who work in the University Writing Center play a central, crucial role at WCU, and I'm grateful for each of them. Working with one client at a time, they provide timely, useful feedback to student writers of all class levels and disciplines, including many international students. To train them, I devote two semesters: first semester, we focus on the nuts and bolts of effective writing center collaboration, and second semester, we focus on writing center theory and its relationship to our individual practices. Not only do my graduate assistants provide an invaluable service, but they are also learning invaluable skills about written discourse and working collaboratively with others in the fullest sense of the phrase.

Barbara Hardie, Director
Writing Center

Whew! We are ALL ready for Spring Break, right? I do hope you will take a moment before you head to the beach or wherever you're headed for a respite, to read this month's issue of the Faculty Forum and respond to this article on a critical issue concerning us all right now—staffing and budget cuts! You may respond to Norma Smith's article by clicking on this link: <http://media.wcu.edu/groups/facultyforum/>

Your comments will be automatically posted to the Faculty Forum website. We are working to make the website more efficient in response to your comments, but meanwhile you will need to use your email username and password to access the website.

***Think Spring!
Vera Holland Guise
Faculty Fellow, Coulter Faculty Center***