



## **Working for the Clampdown Jack Summers**

I am writing to address the likely consequences of recently adopted policies that restrict information sharing by members of university, college, and departmental collegial review committees (CRCs, formerly called TPR committees). The text of the new policy can be found in the faculty handbook beginning on page 102 (from the WCU web page, go to the 'for faculty and staff' link and you will find the link under the faculty heading). In short, the policies forbid members of these committees from discussing CRC business and members caught sharing information can be fired.

In my view, these policies suffer from a number of obvious problems. The first issue is a lack of accountability for CRC members. While the policy should have mechanisms for assuring committee members behave appropriately, it does not. A second issue arises when college and university CRCs interpret policies that are supposed to be determined at the department level. The third (and, to my mind, most important) issue relates to the feedback we provide to our early career faculty. The feedback I have seen has ranged from inadequate to non-existent. Our untenured people require more information, not less. They deserve better.

**Accountability:** It is distressing that the policy contains no provisions to ensure that members of these committees act ethically, or even in compliance with employment law. Can a committee member act based on malice or prejudice? There is nothing in the policy to stop them. If someone states that he will only vote to tenure and promote white Christian heterosexual men, the other committee members cannot speak out without fear that they will be fired. While this example represents an extreme, plenty of more realistic, undesired scenarios may arise. Committee members are free to systematically disregard clearly stated guidelines in a DCRD and may interpret the DCRD in ways that are inconsistent with departmental intent. The policy will protect CRC members from the consequences of sloppy, unethical, or lazy behavior while doing nothing to police these behaviors. The work load associated with serving on these committees is substantial and the secrecy policy will protect anyone who takes shortcuts when faced with a stack of dossiers and a looming deadline.

**Interpretation of departmental CRD at the college and university level.** The policy prevents departments from communicating their expectations to members of the university and college committees, and prevents conscientious members of those committees from seeking clarification regarding practices and standards in other disciplines. Not long ago, we went through the process of revising all DCRDs with the stated intent of standardizing expectations across the university. I recall hearing that there was a perception that some departments were not holding candidates to a high standard. If this is indeed a concern, then university and college committees should be

having that discussion with the tenured members of the department(s) in question, not with the tenure candidate.

While reappointment, tenure, and promotion decisions are supposed to be based on departmental CRDs, many of these documents are intentionally vague and can be interpreted in ways that are different than intended by the department. For example, the university does not have uniform standards for interpreting SAI scores (My requests for a policy guiding review committees on this issue have been denied by leadership last year's faculty senate). While the prevailing opinion among campus leadership appears to hold that CoursEval surveys are reliable gauges of teaching effectiveness, there is ample evidence to the contrary. For an example, Porter argues persuasively that student survey results have little validity (Porter, S. R., Do College Student Surveys Have Any Validity? Rev. Higher Ed, 2011, 35, 45-76) and Johnson (Johnson, V. E. Grade Inflation, A Crisis in College Education, Springer, 2003) has documented evidence that faculty respond to SAI scores by diminishing academic rigor. While this is another issue that is best left to another time, there can be little doubt that serious scholars of higher education do not fall into lock step supporting the validity of SAIs. Getting back to the point, departments that are skeptical of SAI validity cannot be confident that college and university CRCs will interpret their CRDs in a manner consistent with departmental intent. While a representative from a department will be able to present the DCRD to the college committee, that person's opinion may not be representative and most departments will not be represented at the university level. Since the departmental representative is subject to the secrecy policies, they cannot represent the opinions of the college committee to candidates. In short, neither the department nor the committee will be able to tell whether the college or university CRC's interpretation of a given DCRDs is consistent with departmental intent.

**Mentoring the candidates.** As stated earlier, I believe the effects of the policy on the feedback we provide to candidates are of the greatest concern. The policy prevents candidates from learning the expectations of the university, college, and departmental committees. In the past, a departmental committee could address perceived problems with a candidate through informal feedback. This could occur at the college or university level as well. It is possible that the committee's perception is inaccurate and informing the candidate will allow him / her to clarify the dossier in the future. Since informal feedback is not passed up the chain of command, a committee member could use this mechanism to be critical without threatening the career of the person in question. Thus, informal feedback serves as a means to mentor the candidate. The new policy limits feedback to official channels. For the Department of Chemistry and Physics, formal channels mean an up or down vote from the committee and a letter from the department chair. Since the letter goes up the chain to the college and university committees, it is cannot be harshly critical of anyone the chair wishes to retain.

Accepting appointment to a CRC commits you to the confidentiality provisions. I consider these provisions to be an insult to my intelligence, my integrity, and my judgment. I doubt that they are legal. What judge is going to rule that the university can override constitutional guarantees of free speech so as to do the business of a state institution in the dark? Still, I do not feel like being the one to test the hypothesis in court, and I hesitate to reject my department's request that I serve on these committees. The business they conduct is too important.

The intent of the policy appears to be to shield CRC members from the anger of anyone who believes that they had been treated unjustly. Unfortunately, limiting the flow of information can

only increase the likelihood that people will be treated unjustly. Given that our system is populated by people who will inevitably make mistakes and who will inevitably come into conflict, we do need to have a mechanism to manage that conflict. I do not, however, believe that the answer is to shut off information to candidates. The potential for misunderstanding, error, and abuse is substantially mitigated when people communicate.

Our secrecy policy works against the best interests of the faculty and students of this university. Uncertainty of how committees will judge a candidate's merits cannot serve the interests of the university. We hire people with specific credentials and skill sets who frequently have little classroom experience. Many face a steep learning curve when they arrive. Do we want candidates to neglect teaching based on misinformed assumptions about the weight given to scholarship and service? Do we want faculty to inflate student grades and diminish course rigor in pursuit of higher SAI scores? If student learning were a higher priority than administrative ease, we would work to improve our communication with early career faculty. We would invest effort to make sure they know what they need to do in order to succeed at WCU. I don't believe that our best option is to discard people after six years on the learning curve and replace them with a fresh crop of totally inexperienced newcomers.

Since these policies came out of the Faculty Senate there is an inherent assumption that they reflect the will of the faculty. I am not convinced that they do. I don't recall there being much conversation of the topic prior to their adoption. Perhaps it is time we had that conversation. I think it is time we began talking to each other as individuals about the policies that affect our profession. Then perhaps we should talk about these things as departments, then as colleges and finally as the university. Do we really want a culture of secrecy or would we prefer a culture of openness and transparency? Were we properly involved in the creation and shaping of these policies? As I see it, we can either accept a culture that maximizes administrative ease or we can fight to form WCU's culture into what we want it to be.

Thanks for your consideration.

**U Club**  
**Marsha Lee Baker**

If you've heard of the U Club, you likely have heard it's a great place to make new friends, acquaintances and work associates. It's true! I visited the U Club before I was even employed by Western--it was part of my on-campus visit interviewing for my job. I joined right away and have been a member for sixteen years. On Fridays at TGIF, I unwind with Western folks I count among my treasured friends; chat with valued acquaintances; meet for the first time folks I may or may not know by name, voice, or face. Thanks to the U Club, I know people who've been at Western since the 1960s and people who arrived last month; people in every academic college and practically every administrative division. I know staff and faculty members I likely would never know including administrative assistants, program directors, engineers, nurses, librarians, maintenance crew members, deans, scientists, marketers, as well as the partners and kids they bring to the club with them. They add to the fun in my life and improve my work relationships.

U Club TGIFs are drop-in every Friday from 5:00 - 7:00 pm. It also organizes several annual special events, like the one coming up January 25. The Robbie Burns Supper is famous world- and campus-wide for celebrating food, drink and frolicking in the spirit of its namesake,

Scotland's (in)famous eighteenth century poet and lyricist. Come join the fun! Happy hour will begin at 5:00 with the Robbie Burns Supper starting at 6:00. It'll be at Mad Batter.

All university staff and faculty members are invited to be U Club members. Dues are modest at \$30/semester. U Club currently meets in the recreation area of the Canterbury House (on Speedwell Road across from the Ramsey Center) unless otherwise announced. We will have a new, permanent location this fall!

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