



## **Editor's Note**

This month's Forum has a slightly different format. Vicki Faircloth wrote the opening essay, in which she shares her recent experiences having students with disabilities in her classes. Following Vicki's essay, Lisa Bloom offers an explanation of some of the laws, rights, and opportunities related to working with college students with disabilities.

A response to last month's forum by Catherine Carter is in the final section. Though I received only one response for publication, several faculty verbally shared their appreciation for her article.

The Faculty Forum will be published on the third Monday of each month during the fall and spring semesters. Please consider contributing to campus conversations by submitting to one or both of these sections:

**1. Lead Commentary.** This is an essay written by a faculty member addressing an issue, hot topic, or general faculty concern. They usually run anywhere from 750 to 1000 words, but they can be longer or shorter. And, like this month, faculty may collaborate on a Forum.

**2. Responses.** These are faculty comments about and reactions to the previous months' FF. They are often substantive, even critical responses to the essay of the previous month. The **Responses** section is a great way to engage in discussion around campus.

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## **The Challenges - and Rewards - of Teaching WCU Students with Disabilities**

***Victoria Faircloth***  
***School of Teaching and Learning***

*"If we want to grow as teachers—we must do something alien to academic culture: we must talk to each other about our inner lives—risky stuff in a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract."* (Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*)

When I inquired about writing a Faculty Forum on working with my students with disabilities, I thought of challenges I feel as one professor, on my own solitary journey through academia. We each choose a course with a predetermined set of values that support our journey as human

beings and as academics. Parker Palmer's landmark book, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, has influenced my work for years, but my new experiences teaching students with disabilities has reminded me that "we teach who we are...in times of darkness as well as light."

### **Looking for Paul\***

And so it began spring semester, 2014. I had no plans to explore the inner landscape of my teacher-self. I was aware of WCU's [University Participant Program \(UP\)](#) which gives students with intellectual disabilities an opportunity for a full college experience, but I was unaware of the impact having a UP student in my class would have on me.

First day of class. I am nervous. As soon as everyone settles into their desks, I begin searching for Paul, expecting to be able to easily find a student with Down syndrome. I cringe at my insecurity, a seasoned professor of 24 years. Soon I locate him among the 35 sophomores: Public Law 94-142, in the flesh, row two, three desks back. ([Public Law 94-142](#) is the "Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. See below for Lisa Bloom's explanation of this and related laws and policies.)

I feel inadequate. I teach people how to teach. Yet, here I stand, in a room full of sophomores, trying to figure out which one is Paul, because I am looking for some sign, some direction about how to *teach* him. When we go over the features in the textbook, I canvas the room, noting if Paul is attentive and keeping up with class discussion.

The truth is I do not know if this young man will be able to comprehend the course material. I am reluctant to say this out loud, to myself, to the Office of Disabilities staff, or to the Director of the UP Program, Paul's home base.

After class, we had time to speak briefly, and that was when I had my second moment of inadequacy. I could not understand most of what he said. Do I ask him to repeat himself, maybe more than once? Is it better to pretend I understand him? If I do that, am I trying to save face here, for him and for me, too? He is my student, and it is my job to communicate effectively with him, today. I walk back to my office, hoping that my face doesn't reveal that I am embarrassed, a little scared, and seriously wondering how I can possibly model for a group of college students how to teach Paul. In fact, I have already decided I will likely fail, and all the students will be aware of this fact, and why don't I just go on and retire before the course evaluations come in.

### **A New Adventure in Teaching**

And thus began the challenging but enlightening adventure of teaching a student with Down syndrome. My knowledge of the effects of Down syndrome on comprehension and cognition was minimal. In fact, I found myself doing Google searches, rather than asking folks who knew more than I did. My preconceived notion was that students with Down syndrome were not capable of comprehending college level work.

Each Tuesday and Thursday, I found myself looking for indicators that Paul was keeping up. Our roles became reversed: the first lesson I learned was when he spoke up in a discussion on Chapter 2, Different Ways of Learning. What he taught me that day was that although his communication skills were difficult to understand, he got the concepts. Each class period, it

became easier to understand what he was saying. In time, I realized that it was not his communication skills that were improving, it was my listening skills that were getting sharper each time he spoke. Eventually I understood his words without having to hear each sound in each word.

My next realization was that being in a college class setting was an honor for Paul. The way he carried himself into class, his eagerness to participate in discussions, to ask questions, his confidence steadily growing. But the chapter on educational philosophy was going to be a significant challenge, with so many unfamiliar, abstract, multi-syllabic terms. I prepared myself for him to struggle, and I worried that he would not be able to complete the required assignment.

Wrong!

Once again, I had to be hit in the head: communication skills are not always an indicator of comprehension skills. The college student volunteer who attended class with Paul and assisted him with class activities, suggested that since writing was difficult for him, perhaps I could allow him to do a PowerPoint presentation. I had no idea what to expect, but what I got was a well-developed presentation that addressed all the questions required in the paper. Clearly his work indicated that he understood the philosophies, and how one or more of them fit with his personal philosophy of educating young children in a daycare setting. He “wrote” his paper in a way that reflected his understanding of the requirement in a pre-dominantly visual, non-text format.

Paul did every assignment, with some adaptations, took all ten chapter quizzes, participated in every group project, and made a short speech at the end of the semester about how much it meant to him to be part of our class. He got his certificate of completion at the University commencement ceremony, is able to live an independent life, gainfully employed at a day-care center, where he rides public transportation to work every day.

### **And Along Came Rachel**

If that wasn't enough to tug at that inner landscape of my teacher-life...along comes fall semester, and two minutes into my first class, a young woman interrupted me with an announcement for the entire class. Twenty-four years as professor, and I have never been interrupted by a student at the beginning of the first class. She stood up and said she had Tourette syndrome and gave a brief explanation of the condition with specific details of the types of noises she might make. She assured everyone if noises reached the screaming level, she would dismiss herself from class, as she had no desire to be disruptive. I had no idea what to expect and was, again, a bit nervous. Over the next couple of class sessions, I listened carefully to the tics so I could learn to make adjustments, if needed. And yes, I did more Google searches, hoping to be a fast learner, so the inadequacy I felt from lack of knowledge of Tourette syndrome would not lower my status as the learned professor.

### **Meeting Virginia**

And then came Virginia, who is deaf, to another course in my fall schedule. I quickly learned how to teach with an interpreter in class. Basically, all I had to do was just teach, and the student who is deaf and her interpreter followed my lead. Not nearly as anxiety producing as I had felt for the other two students. After all, my inadequacy regarding the most effective learning

arrangement was not an issue in this class. I had a helper who was paid by WCU for each class session.

### **Learning from My Students**

What pushed me into my inner landscape was the realization that I actually had helpers in *each* of those classes. I had spent so much time worrying that I was slow to see all my students had become my teachers. Every time Virginia spoke in front of the class, the students gave her hardy applause, even though she could not hear it! Students admired Rachel because she was so brave to speak to the class about having Tourette syndrome. And the students applauded when Paul told them how much it meant to him to be part of the class.

The disabilities of the three students in my classes were visible to the rest of us while we keep ours out-of-sight. What grit they have, what willpower to face fear and stay on their journey, determined to have a life goal that was denied in the past. They attend classes every day, knowing they may be the only student with a disability and hoping, just hoping they will be accepted.

\*Pseudonyms have been used throughout this essay.

### **FYI: Laws, Rights and Opportunities**

*Lisa Bloom*  
*School of Teaching and Learning*

\*[Public Law 94-142](#), the federal legislation that became law in 1975 guaranteed a free and appropriate public education to all. Prior to 1975, school age individuals with disabilities were kept at home, sent to special schools or institutionalized. The law has undergone several revisions and is now referred to as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or [IDEA](#). IDEA covers the rights of school-age children and youth, but a “free” postsecondary education is available to very few people.

The [Americans with Disability Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act](#) protects the rights of adults with disabilities. While this legislation does not provide for a free education, it does protect the rights of individuals who are “qualified” by requiring universities to make programs accessible and forbidding discriminatory admissions practices such as screening out individuals with physical, mental or intellectual disabilities. This legislation covers individuals who meet the general requirements for admission to a university and requires the university to make accommodations and modifications to make programs accessible. Guide dogs in the classroom, interpreters, note-takers, taped lectures, accessible buildings and classrooms are examples of accommodations that might be required.

Individuals with an intellectual disability may not meet the standards and rigor required for admission to a 4-year college. Even so, as Dr. Faircloth illustrates, those individuals can benefit from the intellectual and social climate of a university.

Many of us grew up in an era when individuals with disabilities were excluded from our schools and classrooms. Even today, while children and youth with disabilities are educated in public

schools, they are often served in separate rooms or separate corners of a classroom. Hence, few of us have seen good models of full inclusion of individuals with disabilities. WCU is becoming such a model: student support services provides support to students with a range of disabilities and helps students develop a plan that outlines their accommodations. More recently, the [University Participant](#) (UP) program, a nationally recognized program founded by Drs. Kelly Kelley and David Westling, gives students with intellectual disabilities an opportunity for a college experience culminating in a Certificate of Accomplishment received during Commencement ceremonies.

Dr. Faircloth's trepidation with accommodating students with disabilities is not uncommon. Faculty are not always sure how to deal with the challenges of having an individual with a disability in a university classroom. I believe the trepidation, in part, comes from our early experiences with exclusion. Dr. Faircloth has bravely and compassionately shared her journey.

The question is not whether individuals with disabilities should be included and accommodated but how to best meet their needs. The answer to the latter question is quite simple. Ask. Ask the individual with a disability first and then if needed and appropriate, ask the staff and faculty involved with their support.

## **Response to Last Month's Forum "Where We Live and What We Do" by Catherine Carter**

*John A. Williams*

### *Forensic Anthropology & Western Carolina Human Identification Laboratory*

I don't wish to stretch out what has been said in the past two issues of the Forum but I felt the need to respond. I am a commuter (30 minutes each way) and live in Haywood County. The drive, by the way, is one of the things I look forward to both coming and going each day. I chose to live in Haywood County not for reasons of not wanting to be in the WCU Community but for medical ones. My wife requires medical care available in Asheville. Clyde where we live seems to be good compromise in distance traveled by either of us.

We do miss at times the events on campus that living away makes it difficult to attend. At the same time after 35 years as a professor I don't miss the urge to drop in the office at night or on weekends. When I was at my former institution I lived less than 10 minutes from campus. I spent too much time away from home when my girls were growing up. I vowed that when I came to WCU my job was going to be Monday through Friday 8-5. I have for the most part kept that vow. I will if need be stay after 5 and if I come in on a weekend I must have a very, very good reason to do so. Now does living away from Cullowhee mean I shortchange my students and that I wish not to be collegial. It doesn't. It simply means that I have other priorities in my life that are simply far more important than going to the UClub on Friday evenings.