

Faculty Forum

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Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 12, No. 1

September 1, 1999

Raising the Bar Revisited: Some Inconvenient Questions* about Unintended Consequences

*At the general faculty meeting, Terry Kinnear, Chair of the Faculty, challenged us to ask "inconvenient" questions. This article raises such questions about the effect of exclusive honors courses.

Chancellor Bardo reported at the general faculty meeting on August 12 that the quality of our students is the best ever, pronouncing our attempts to increase standards a success. We are attracting National Merit Scholars and average SAT scores are up. These are indeed promising trends.

Recently, however, I have heard more than a few faculty murmuring about a decline in the quality of classroom dynamics. For example, one who regularly teaches general education classes complained that her students seem to have gone downhill in the last couple of years. Where they once had a certain vitality stemming from diverse student abilities and interests, she said, they now seem duller. Another was perplexed by his "sweet but disabled" sophomore class, and he wondered where the better students had gone. This seems ironic given the well-publicized increase in WCU student quality.

Something seems awry here. How can it be that we bring in better students and raise the bar but still complain about listless classes? Could it be the result of a siphoning off of the better students through the "Honors Program Students Only" designation, leaving some classes depleted of high achieving and highly motivated students? The Honors College website lists 35 honors courses for the spring 1998 semester. The schedule of courses for this fall indicates that 33 courses are reserved for honors program students only. These include:

26 general education courses
2 lab courses
5 USI (Honors Forum) courses

Additionally, the Honors College offers a Millennium Seminar, a learning community for 20 honors students in which they will take eight interrelated courses together for their entire freshman year. For all the good it's doing the honors students, I'm afraid the Honors College may be creating a brain-drain in non-honors classes, thereby contributing to the emergence of a two-tiered system at WCU.

Dr. Bardo said the higher quality of our 400 honors students causes the other students to stretch. That's a good theory if the honors students are integrated into the mainstream, particularly in general education, where the non-honors students can benefit from their vigorous class contributions. When the Honors College was planned, the classes were not intended to be exclusive. Honors courses were supposed to be open to any motivated student who was willing to

work hard. Honors students would be mixed in with others, resulting in high bar classes causing all participants to stretch.

We have reason to be proud of our attempts to raise the bar. Attracting better students to WCU is a major part of the initiative. The Honors College is a creative and positive strategy. But our attempts to raise the bar will backfire if honors students are secluded from non-honors students and if the perks they receive are excessive in comparison to non-honors students. The Honors College website appeals to students with the following questions:

*Have you ever been in a class that was so unchallenging you could hardly stay awake?
Have you ever wanted to learn more and faster than the class would allow? Or wish
you could have a discussion with a professor in class rather than simply listen?*

Advantages to honors students, according to the website, are exciting classes, smaller classes, priority registration, and an honors common room in G-55 Stillwell where honors students have access to a free copier, computers, social area, TV/VCR, and phones. The invitation to live in the honors dorm in Reynolds is advertised in a David Letterman format:

Top 10 Reasons to Live in Reynolds, The Honors Residence:

- | | |
|---|------------------------------------|
| 10. Big screen TV | 5. Four people per bathroom |
| 9. Balconies on second and third floors | 4. Sink in every room |
| 8. Larger rooms | 3. Lobby resembles that of a hotel |
| 7. Only air-conditioned residence | 2. Personal beach volleyball court |
| 6. Only residence with a computer lab | 1. Friendly atmosphere |

In view of the perks offered for the Honors students, it's not surprising that the freshman survey reports honors students had much higher satisfaction with campus life (96%) in comparison to 48% for other students.

Our mission encourages us to expect all students to make valuable contributions to the WCU community. The catalog states:

To encourage and protect the free and open interchange of ideas, the University strives to provide experiences that foster the development of respect among all its members toward the larger communities of which it is a part....

Rather than "raising the bar" for all students, we may have created a two-tiered system, separating the elite from the ordinary. Elitism and privilege do not really seem to mesh with our stated ideals or our historical mission. If we want to truly raise the bar, we must have high expectations for all students, not only the ones designated as the "best." More classes should be honors classes, but they should be open to every student who wishes to make the effort. Such classes should contain a healthy mix of all types of students at WCU. The unintended consequences of exclusive honors courses may be undermining our attempts to raise the bar for the University as a whole.

Mary Jean Ronan Herzog, Educational Leadership & Foundations

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.

Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "Raising the Bar Revisited," by Mary Jean Ronan Herzog, 9/1/99

Mary Jean's argument in the *Faculty Forum* is based on the assertion that honors students are not "integrated into the mainstream" and are the cause of a "brain drain" from other classes. Honors students take honors courses (almost all of these general education) within the first two years; there are no 300 or 400-level honors courses. Usually, less than half of the general education courses that these students take are honors. The rest of the course work they do in honors is through "Honors Contracts" in regular classes. The typical honors student will do no more than about 15% of his or her course work toward a degree in honors courses. In 1996, there were just over 100 students in the old honors program (they took honors courses then, too). Today, there are 500 students in the Honors College and most of them are in non-honors courses and the majority of them (in the majors) are not taking any honors courses. There are more honors students taking non-honors courses on this campus than ever before.

Brian Railsback, Acting Dean, Honors College

Oh, I get it. This is reverse psychology. Excellent, Mary Jean! You are so sly as you draw our attention to the often-missed highlights of the Honors College (e.g., the statistical success in recruiting and retaining students, the attractive webpages, the appreciated sense of belonging, smaller student-faculty ratios, students' pride and satisfaction, the appropriate environmental resources) to get us to realize that *WCU could be doing this for all students!* Very good point, MJ. In fact, in your next piece, please raise similar "inconvenient questions" about Project Care, for we need to pay attention to successes of both these "special interest" programs so we might do what Corporate America does better than us in Higher Ed—praise, study, copy and reward successful products and programs.

Chris Gunn, Counseling & Psychological Services

I appreciated your article in the *Faculty Forum*. I imagine that Jeannie Oakes, a leader in the de-tracking of students movement, would applaud. Your attention to the dilemma of modeling a tracking system within our university caused me to reflect on our reasons for doing so. I understand the decisions in light of retention of outstanding students, but I wonder if those very students are at a disadvantage. Other students have much to teach these "honors" students.

Gayle Moller, Educational Leadership and Foundations

The text for USI 130, the class required for all freshman, provides some interesting guidelines regarding ethical decision making. Perhaps we should practice what we preach and use these same guidelines to evaluate the merits of the Honors College as it currently exists. Several students, both freshmen and upperclassmen, have made comments to me recently about the Honors College that would lead one to consider its existence from an ethical standpoint. One junior said, "If you get the message enough times that you are not good enough, you begin to believe it. I used to think I could be a part of the Honors College, and now I realize I will never be." The guidelines in the USI text, among other applicable points, suggests that equity and benefit maximization should be considered in making ethical decisions. While I am not opposed to the existence of an honor's college, is there a way it could be structured so that it were equitable and of benefit to more than just an elite group of students?

Lisa Bloom, Human Services

Responses to "Raising the Bar Revisited," by Mary Jean Herzog, 9/1/99, continued

Mary Jean admits that her assumptions about what goes on in general education sections are based on anecdotal evidence so I wish to add mine. I came to Western ten years ago after teaching four years at three institutions, two private colleges and one community college. I was in shock for the first several weeks I was here. Nothing I had experienced in the classroom prepared me for my general education classes. My students were nice kids but they were very poorly prepared and weren't terribly interested in learning. Many started to party on Wednesday night, most thought an adequate response to an essay question was three sentences long. In world religion courses some students bore witness on final exams but weren't sure who Moses and David were. On the whole they were not as strong as my community college students.

New people I met in Asheville or Hendersonville would say "Oh yes, Western; that's the place where anyone can get in." I had students from my church tell me they decided to come to Western because they could not get in the school they wanted and as soon as their grades were good enough they would leave. This is not to say I didn't get some very good students in general education classes but I generally could not identify them until after the first exam and often when I spoke to them they told me they also planned to leave at the first opportunity. I didn't blame them; I too wanted to leave. They didn't really speak out much in class because the world of ideas was not valued. I had never encountered a campus culture so void of intellectual life.

Somehow, I became part of the "Honors Faculty" and several years ago I attended an honor's faculty breakfast at which one administrator said we were giving honors students the same education they would get at Davidson. This was a lie of such proportions that it boggled the mind. At that time there was not much of a curriculum. My experience with honors students was through honors contracts: honors students in my courses would request something extra to do to make it an "honors" class. So we would read an extra book and meet once a week outside of class to discuss it. These students were not all that vocal in class. There were so few of them I believe the negative momentum of campus culture just crushed them.

It is my experience that over the last several years all my general education classes have steadily improved. This is due in part to my having learned to teach Western students more effectively than when I was first here, but I also think our students are better. Not just that they are coming better prepared, but that we are, excruciatingly slowly, moving toward an institution where intellectual pursuits are really valued, not buried under "feel good" rhetoric. I think the Honors College has been a major part of this movement.

The only disappointment I have with the new honors sections of general education, and here I agree with Mary Jean, is that we have been unable to reserve places in them for non-honors students. This is not what the honors college committee had envisaged. Part of the problem has been that the Honors College has grown much faster than we expected and all the sections are filled with honors students. To remedy the problem we should reserve a few seats in each section for non-honors students who want the challenge of an honors class. Of course this means we will have to open even more sections. This possibility does not bother me at all. But if Mary Jean is right; it could take even more of the most motivated students out of the regular sections.

Finally, honors students still take most of their courses with non-honors students. Students feed off each other's energy and excitement. Hopefully honors students leave their honors college residence has created another haven on campus for intellectual discussion that is open to whoever wants to seek it out. The college itself is open to anyone with the interest, ability, and commitment to join it. I don't find this type of elitism disturbing.

James McLachlan, Philosophy and Religion

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Responses to "Raising the Bar Revisited," by Mary Jean Herzog, 9/1/99, continued

A diverse array of students certainly makes a positive difference in classroom atmosphere, as evidenced in my evening Music Appreciation class this semester, where among the 65 students there are several adults and honors college students. What is needed is fewer honors college courses and greater encouragement of those students to take regular courses with honors contracts.

James Maroney, Music

On many of the points she raises, I agree with Mary Jean. That we might create intellectual and social elites by placing students (whether in high school or in college) in honors and non-honors tracks is certainly a possibility of which we should be aware and against which we should guard. However, the "honor course issue" Mary Jean raised is multifaceted and can, I think, be broken down into four, somewhat independent, issues. The first three of these are relevant to what we see and do in our classrooms. The fourth issue concerns the potential effects of ability-based segregation on social interactions outside of the classroom.

A first issue involves the relationships among "raising the bar" via higher SAT scores, classroom discourse, and critical thinking. As Mary Jean pointed out, we strive in our courses to engage students intellectually in the task of sharing and creating knowledge. Mary Jean's concern is that, by separating honor students from the general student population, we will inadvertently decrease classroom diversity, level of discussion, and vitality and that, because the Honor's College is siphoning away the better students, instructors are left with depleted "raw materials" with whom they work and interact. Thus, our general ed courses are populated by fewer students who enjoy knowledge acquisition, intellectual challenge, and involvement in engaging, well thought-out student-student and teacher-student argumentation. This conclusion, which is apparently shared with a number of Mary Jean's colleagues, may well be correct, but I would caution against its hasty acceptance.

My primary concern is that we too readily interpret SAT scores (and, more generally, scores from standardized "ability" tests) as indices of aspects of intellectual dispositions and motivations that they are not intended to measure directly. In brief, considerable empirical evidence contravenes the assumption that aspects of critical thinking and intellectual engagement are related to SAT and intelligence test scores. In the face of this evidence, Mary Jean's concerns may be premature: we do not know how SAT-based segregation has affected the distribution of intellectual dispositions or motivations. In addition, as Mary Jean undoubtedly knows, her "sample" of instructors is biased in a number of ways. For example, even if their observations were valid, instructors who teach only the general student population, but not honors students, cannot know whether or not the same diminished intellectual engagement (relative to previous years) that they see in their classes would also be evident if they taught honor's classes. Similarly, if the observations Mary Jean reported are accurate, we do not know that they arose because of "tracking" into general and elite populations--self-fulfilling prophecies on the part of teachers could well account for the observed differences. The point of these observations is simply that we should be wary of making quick and easy generalizations based on little evidence. If we are really concerned over this issue (and we should be), we need to examine the classroom atmospheres created by our students and instructors in a series of well-designed research projects.

The second issue concerns the possible "brain drain" in the general student population. Certainly, our higher admission standards now suggest that we're not dealing with "dumber" students in the general population. What has happened is that the range of intellectual ability in that population has decreased (because, first, higher ability students have been removed in the sense that they take some, but not all, of their courses separately from other students and, second, more lower ability students

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Responses to "Raising the Bar Revisited," by Mary Jean Herzog, 9/1/99, continued

have been kept out the population because of higher admission standards). Again, although we don't know whether or not the distribution of various critical thinking dispositions and motivations have been affected by the honor's program, the general population of students is more intellectually homogenous than in the past.

Third, how would honor's courses change if they were open to all students? Obviously, diversification--at least in terms of intellectual ability, would increase. I would argue that this diversification is not likely to change the level, type, or intensity of in-class discussions. As noted previously, personal dispositions to look forward to, accept, and pursue challenging intellectual tasks (called, in the social psychology literature, the "Need for Cognition"), is poorly correlated with raw "ability." In the general student population (the intellectual underclass), a significant percentage (again, we need research to determine this percentage) will be motivationally-driven by this "need." These are precisely those students who would most likely enroll in honor's courses if they had the opportunity. Relative to more "intelligent" students (as measured by intelligence test proxies, like the SAT), less intelligent students with greater "needs for cognition" are better critical thinkers on numerous dimensions (e.g., open-mindedness, willingness to evaluate and ponder evidence contrary to personal beliefs). This statement is not merely my opinion; it is a well-established empirical finding. It's a shame that this group of thoughtful, highly-motivated students doesn't have the same opportunities as students with high SAT scores (the validity of this points hinges on making a leap of faith--that honor's courses are more engaging, challenging, and discussion-oriented than non-honor's courses).

Finally, we now segregate students into two tiers, an underclass and an elite. Sociological and psychological research over the past century has established that, whether it takes place in educational contexts or more general societal contexts, this results in distinctively class-related attitudes. Look at us: isn't intellectual snobbery evident when faculty from some department/colleges compare themselves with faculty from other departments/colleges? My concern, however, is this: have elitist attitudes formed in our honor's students? Do honor's students see themselves as "better" than students who live in small rooms without air-conditioning in dorms that look nothing like hotels and have palm-sized TVs or sinks hidden away in bathrooms and who simply bob their heads up and down in class and learn slowly, very slowly? The honor's students themselves answer this question: see their web page.

Paul Klaczynski, Psychology

Is Mary Jean Ronan Herzog attacking the Honor's College website for being so clever and visually pleasing? Maybe some of the Honors College satisfaction rates and popularity is due to this website? Maybe it appeals to students because it was written and designed by honors college students? Maybe if the Chancellor finds out which students created those web pages, he'll hire them to do the same for other colleges and departments? (They might be cheaper than outside consultants). Maybe?

Anonymous



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

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In Defense Of Elitism

“Now, my Friend, who are the *aristoi* [“the best”]? Philosophy may Answer “The Wise and Good.” But the World, Mankind, have by their practice always answered, “the rich the beautiful and well born”. . . . What chance have Talents and Virtues in comparison with Wealth and Birth? and Beauty?”

John Adams to Thomas Jefferson; Sept. 2, 1813

Mary Jean Herzog’s revisiting the bar seems to have left me groggy. In addition to Adams’ list of wealth, birth, and beauty, we should also have to include the ‘sweetly disabled’ students of the modern university. She claims that elitism and privilege do not mesh with our ideals or mission as a university. However, I wish to raise some “inconvenient questions” about her appraisal of our situation and to defend several unfashionable principles underlying the idea of an Honors College.

Not only do ‘elitism’ and ‘privilege’ mesh with, they are required by, institutions of higher learning. To enlist such epithets is to fail to recognize that knowledge-elitism is a natural product of human activities and social practices that embrace earned privilege whereas power-elitism is a defective holdover from the days of royal prerogative which is inconsistent with democratic practices. Our own democratic traditions, at their best, rightly exemplify the former and at the same time abhor the latter sort of elitism.

To call an Honors College “elitist” is itself a product of an elitist, privileged education. Recognizing excellence is one of the tasks of any worthwhile, lasting human activity or social practice, and so it is central to democratically oriented institutions. The recent idea that all should be rewarded equally, no matter how much or how little they contribute to or even care about the ultimate goal, is a mistaken and ultimately self-defeating social/political and educational goal. Similarly, the conception that all are equally talented and evenly prepared for present or future tasks is doomed to a short life. Imagine how destructive such a policy would be were we to institute it in our hiring craftspeople: we would have to say that we don’t want the best mechanic or doctor or carpenter; after all, they all are equally gifted or all deserve equal recognition. Of course, this on the surface sounds like egalitarianism, but it is the sort that is destined to subject us all to the ‘Tyranny of the Majority’, as John Stuart Mill rightly called the desires for power of the ill-informed and ill-willed.

To pretend that all elitism is despicable or only exists once students are here is incoherent. It is elitism and privilege to be able to attend a university at all. Our jobs represent elitist, privileged positions in our society. The moment I trudged out of the loamy farm soils of southern Indiana and stepped onto the manicured campus of a university, I entered into the life of privilege. Giving out grades (of any sort) is elitist; judging this work (of art, science, or a craft) as of higher quality than that work is elitist. In fact, such elitism is unavoidable. We already provide athletic scholarships to those who are physically talented. Why then are we, the privileged few, so offended by the idea of providing the intellectually gifted with a few privileges, which we all acknowledge they have earned? And why are those of us in the Academy, of all places, complaining about the attainment of academic excellence?

To reflect on our democratic ideal of disseminating knowledge among the people is to recognize that some people are naturally going to be more well-informed than others. A true

republic depends on a populace of well-informed citizens; however, let's face it: not everyone desires or is competent at being well-informed. Many people rely on journalists, news anchors, film critics, ministers, politicians, doctors, and other 'experts' for their information. Consequently, ill-informed or biased sorts often dominate all sorts of media: ideologues clog our scholarly journals; religious and political demagogues pander the masses for financial support; dysfunctional whiners/exhibitionists/doomsdayers terrorize communications media; and pseudo-scientists feel compelled to offer up their 'solutions' to the less informed. Without some individual and groups of well-informed, reflective, and constructively critical activists, a *lively* democratic regime cannot survive. We should not confuse power-elitism (rule by a specially privileged group unfairly wielding inordinate power) with knowledge-elitism (reliance on leadership by a select group on the basis of their deliberations). So, let's not fool ourselves into thinking Honors classes are elitist whereas regular classes, or other parts of the university, are not.

Anyone that excels in a craft intuitively raises their own standards of excellence and simultaneously invokes appropriate standards for apprentices and 'journeymen' in the craft. If learning and teaching are crafts, then let's not feign that elitism does not and should not exist. That is yet another one of the dishonesties of the modern Academy. We should recall Socrates' remark that the truly free person is one who inculcates not only knowledge, but also good will and frankness. Our apprentices might better attain lives of flourishing by more application of this insight.

Finally, to recall our own tradition as a republic of learning is also to acknowledge the call for excellence and elitism in the Academy. As Jefferson and Adams noted in their survey of the past, all societies bring forth a "natural aristocracy" of leaders. Who are these *aristoi* ["the best"]? Certainly not, as Adams and Jefferson fully agree, the 'usual suspects', i.e. the rich, beautiful, or well born. Nor, one might add, are they the 'sweetly disabled'. Of course, that does not mean that we are not to help all of those under our charge to become liberated to actualize their potentialities. Certainly, that is a main part of our task. "The Wise and the Good" is the answer given by thinkers from Socrates to Jefferson; that is because they are the ones who can best reason through wisely and moderately, speaking about the driving issues of every age, not merely the present. It was Adams' whispered fear that the 'pseudo-aristocracy', comprised of the wealthy, beautiful, and wellborn, would domineer and destroy the young republic: what chance, he says, do talents and virtues have when competing with wealth, birth, and beauty? More distrustful than Jefferson, he was sure that Washington's children would be courted by or become enamored of European aristocracy here. A moment's thought about American obsessions with Princess Di or the Rockefellers demonstrates the fear to be well-founded. And so it is with the modern Academy: obsessions with pedigrees, titles, and 'professionalism' prevails in teaching; and our withdrawal into scholarly cubicles is of a piece with our surrenders to marketing analysis of external consultants, educational assessments from those not in the trenches, public relations hypes of mission statements, political agendas of demagogic legislators, and any number of other pressures.

It must be our overarching and common goal (otherwise, let's give up the tired rhetoric about "community") as teachers of the young (faculty, staff, administrators) to **craft**, not 'produce' (or, 'facilitate' for academic 'success') well-rounded, discerning reasoners who love learning. This is our task for the 'sweetly disabled' as much as for the self-enabled. I for one hope that we in the Academy encourage the wise and the good rather than the wealthy, beautiful, wellborn and pseudo-disabled; the latter dominate far too much of our national culture. Let us prove Jefferson (and his optimism about the prevalence of a natural aristocracy) rather than Adams (and his pessimism about the rule of the pseudo-aristocrats) to be the prophet honored in his own country. And let us not disdain the ideal of our common goal, remembering this means we should gladly aid our current apprentices to attain the lives of privilege and flourishing that we richly enjoy.

Apologist for the Wise and Good,

Daryl L. Hale, Philosophy & Religion Dept.

Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "In Defense Of Elitism," by Daryl L. Hale, 10/1/99

I think what Mary Jean was trying to do with her article was to find some reason for the continued downward spiral of the "average" WCU student in terms of basic literacy, effort, and civility. The SAT scores may be up (note that they are still about 850 on the old scale) but that does not mean that our students are better prepared. The difference in the current set of students and the students of 10 years ago is like night and day. I used to observe (translation: complain) that many of our students could not read or write at a reasonable level; now I observe that most of our students can barely read or write at any level.

Richard Stephens, Math

I couldn't stop smiling as I read Daryl's piece in the last Faculty Forum. He said everything I would like to say, in a much more eloquent way. While he quotes his favorite scholars, I would like to give one of mine some credit: "You have brains in your head and feet in your shoes; you can point them in any direction you choose." (Dr. Seuss). My question is simple: why shouldn't these students be recognized for their accomplishments? Haven't they EARNED anything and everything we can do to further enhance their educational experience? They have worked hard to get where they are and they are working hard to stay where they are. I think that they should be applauded, not questioned. Honors classes make US better teachers by challenging OUR responsibility to keep these students challenged. I have found my experiences teaching honors courses to be both rejuvenating and humbling. With all of this talk about diversity floating around, I have to stop and wonder about the lack of attention given to those students with "hidden diversities." We have Student Support Services to help those who have learning challenges. Perhaps we need a branch of that program for students who don't. They are just as often the recipients of faulty attributions. Two of my three children have learning challenges, while the third is two grades ahead of her classmates in what she can achieve. Yet, they are all labeled. They all also need and deserve special attention. We need to direct our attention toward students along the continuum and give credit and rewards where they are due. The Honors college is due. Kudos to all of those who have taken the time to meet the "special needs" of these students and to Brian Railsback for creating the opportunities. Thank you, Daryl, for pointing out the inherent contradiction in Mary Jean Herzog's piece. To call or label something or someone as "elite," IS a product of elitism. The only way to avoid this is to refer to ourselves as Western Carolina "Eclectic" Place of Study. Until then, I hope the collection of 4.0ers grows and grows. I shall do everything I can to water the masses.

Patti Cutspec, Communication and Theatre Arts

Why not allow all students, upon standard acceptance, to be eligible for the Honors College? Those who take fifteen or more hours and receive a 4.00 are automatically admitted. If, after being admitted, they fall below a 3.5, they are thrown out. You can add things on like you must have taken this or that in high school or you must take from this list of courses. I think if students culled themselves in or out, Mary Jean's concerns really wouldn't be an issue. It used to be called the Dean's List or something like that. I really wouldn't know.

Stephen Ayers, CTA

While we will not agree on the issues concerning "elitism," I hope we will agree that Daryl Hale's thoughtful essay raises the level of discourse in the Faculty Forum a few notches. I admire the intelligence, professionalism, and style that his essay displays. He has set a high standard for the rest of us.

Brian Railsback, Acting Dean, Honors College



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 12, No. 3

November 1, 1999

A Plea for New Attitudes about General Education

The other day, I was talking to a friend and WCU grad who has two sons in college. One has been here at Western for a couple of years. My friend has told me several times that her son who is here has struggled staying focused on his studies because he was "just" taking general education courses. Her younger son has started attending a community college this semester. I asked my friend how her son liked going to the community college. She said, "he loves it—he went right into what he was interested in; he didn't have to take any general education courses."

Is this an inescapable fact of life? Are general education courses inevitably the overcooked vegetables of the intellectual meal? Is it the case that most students are going to have to hang in there with the general education courses because they are good for them? As some parents say to their children about eating their vegetables, do we have to say about general education courses: "You don't have to like them, you just have to eat them"?

The fundamental problem in any university's general education program is that most students do not like to take general education courses and many faculty members don't like to teach them. Most of us who served on the General Education Review Committee (GERC) know that there is no magic general education curriculum structure that will ensure a fine educational experience for our students. Throughout the planning process we knew that the quality of the general education experience is going to be largely a function of the quality with which we execute whatever program we have. If we are to make the Liberal Studies program work, the key will be to find ways to teach courses that are interesting to take and interesting to teach.

In the new program, faculty members have a great deal of control in designing or redesigning freshman seminars, foundations and perspectives courses, and upper-level general education courses. The criteria for developing courses generally are much less prescriptive than those used when the existing courses were developed. We are entering an important period in the history of our curriculum. To those who are going to be involved in the development of Liberal Studies, I suggest we ask ourselves some hard questions about interest, challenge, and coverage.

How can we make our students more interested in Liberal Studies?

I assume that student and faculty motivation are the most important elements in developing a successful course. The central questions include: Is this course really, truly interesting to the non-specialist? Is this the very best, most exciting matter my discipline has to offer? Have I selectively identified the ideas that are most likely to intellectually engage my students and give them the tools for thinking about my material at the level of a well-educated college graduate? After taking my course, will most of my students be more interested in, or at least be more appreciative of my discipline? Are there ways to relate the material to students' lives?

These questions reflect that fact that whether or not students continue to learn about my subject matter after leaving my course is dependent more on their attitudes about the material than about

any specific information they acquired. I should not feel compelled to relate my subject to students' lives, but if I can, I certainly increase the likelihood that they will not only be interested but remember what we did.

Is my course challenging?

One of the most common criticisms the members of the GERC heard from students was that general education courses at WCU were often simply extensions of high school. The questions here are obvious, but perhaps not so easy to answer. Is my course rigorous? If it is, is it so because I am requiring thinking or because I am making students memorize complex, disconnected material? Am I making students read, write, and think at a college level--quantitatively and qualitatively? Am I setting the proper expectations for upper-level work? Is this going to be a course that a WCU faculty member who does not know the area would enjoy being in?

The questions about challenge are closely tied to those about interest. If there is too much challenge, students will quickly lose interest and give up. If there is not enough challenge, the course is unlikely to be interesting for either student or teacher. Insecure faculty members may worry about a rigorous course receiving bad evaluations, but a course that is both challenging and interesting is likely to be evaluated positively. Teachers must remain interested if the course is challenging because when teachers challenge students, they inevitably create work for themselves in the form of reading, grading and preparing. Providing challenge in liberal studies courses is about more than raising the bar. It is about changing the academic culture of our campus.

Is less (coverage) more (depth)?

A frequent barrier to the creation of courses that are interesting and optimally challenging is the concern faculty members have about covering "the material." What are the skills and attitudes that should be included in "the material" to be covered? Is learning to interact with other students as important as conveying information through a lecture? Should I sacrifice student interest in order to cover more information? Are there ways to cover the information outside the classroom? Have I provided students with the means, including time, to reflect on what is important? What are the chances of students remembering, a year later, material that has been presented through a lecture rather than through a demonstration, a discussion, or an exercise? Would a lecture be more effective if it went into more depth rather than superficially dealing with a broader range of material?

Many of the conflicts we encounter concerning coverage have their roots in the love we have for our own disciplines. We want to convey it all. Instead, we need to try hard to think back to those days when we were students and remember how slowly much of what is now our expertise was really acquired.

The opportunity to take a fresh approach to a general education program occurs only once every 20 years or so. Let's take this rare opportunity to ask ourselves some hard questions about the fundamental assumptions we make about teaching and learning. Let's take the opportunity to change the attitudes of students and faculty about getting liberal studies courses "out of the way."

Bruce Henderson, Psychology

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Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "A Plea for New Attitudes about General Education," by Bruce Henderson, 11/1/99

Bruce, I say "hurray" to you for a very thoughtful essay on the importance of Gen Ed at Western. I have been mystified by the antipathy toward Gen Ed at WCU shown by faculty and students. Given WCU's identity as a teaching, rather than a research institution, one would assume some significant consensus across the university that students should possess a broad understanding of human history and culture as well as skills that lead toward immediate employment. If marketable skills without an understanding of cultural/ historical context define a WCU graduate, how is WCU different from a trade school? The accelerating pace of change in our society is requiring all of us to be life-long learners. The most effective strategy for developing life-long learners, I would argue, is to offer students a rigorous grounding in General Education as well as some marketable skills.

Oak Winters, Continuing Education and Summer School

Bruce challenges us to cast off previously held assumptions and think about General Education and/or Liberal Studies courses in new ways. He's right, of course, but we must do more. We must reexamine and reconsider our clients, the educational process, and all the courses we teach. What if our course content and our delivery methods are simply irrelevant to our students and their needs? Can we hope to generate interest and motivation unless students are empowered to take control over their learning goals and objectives? Do we have the courage to move from telling students what they need to learn and in what order (in our learned opinions) to assisting students as they follow their own lines of inquiry regardless of discipline? Do we have the vision and courage to abolish discipline-based departments, traditional academic majors, and outmoded grading schemes? Do we dare to become learning facilitators in a non-disciplinary world? We should all read and discuss the 1995 book, Engines for Education, by Roger C. Schank and Chip Cleary of Northwestern University's Institute for the Learning Sciences.

John Moore, Communications and Theatre Arts

If we are really apathetic about General Education, as Bruce implies, we are not likely to respond, are we? Duh!

anonymous



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 12, No. 4

December 1, 1999

Taking Up the Liberal Studies Challenge

Bruce Henderson's reflections on General Education highlight the important and challenging possibilities of the new Liberal Studies Program. But I don't think the questions he raises can be answered without first answering a more fundamental question: just what exactly do we expect our General Education curriculum to accomplish?

Let me offer my answer: General Education courses should give students the tools to become more informed about, and to analyze, any problem which may confront them throughout their lives. General Education should help create students and citizens who challenge their own assumptions and the assumptions of others, citizens who ask questions about the world around them and seek answers, students and citizens who can think critically. In the current business vernacular, we should be encouraging students to "think outside the box." This doesn't sound too controversial until you consider what I'm leaving out: the more traditional view that General Education courses are about transmitting information, about inculcating (in my department's case) a knowledge of past history. I believe that transmitting information should be no more than a secondary concern, at best.

Why do students think many of our current General Education courses are just an extension of high school? Precisely because unfocused surveys often replicate the kind of vague generalities and memorization of information most of them got before coming here. Many of the current General Education offerings are like "Introductory Survey Lite," taking an already broad survey course designed for new majors and watering it down even further. As Bruce rightly notes, we can get caught up in trying to convey glimpses of the broad spectrum of knowledge that we ourselves have so laboriously assimilated over a long career of graduate school and research. Another factor in the watering down process can be our own low expectations of non-majors, who are "forced" into taking courses they don't like, leading us to "dumb down" material already general and often vague. The same expectations often lead us towards traditional teaching styles that can reinforce memorization over analysis. What's the point of having small classes if we're going to teach and test 30 students the same way we'd teach and test 300?

When I teach History 105 (Western Civilization), I care less about whether a year from now my students remember who succeeded Henry VIII or who won the battle of the Somme or what John Stuart Mill said about the subjection of women than I do about the students' ability to formulate coherent arguments or to think critically and ask questions about the world around them. They may not remember all those historical details, but if I give them the tools to find information and to understand it, to fit information into a wider context and to think about it critically, then I will have succeeded in giving them a real education. General Education courses in all departments should not be about the memorization of information but about the synthesis of information and about deep understanding.

This is not a simple process, nor is it one that students necessarily like. It is much safer to be content in one's own preconceptions about the world. We do not like our assumptions of the

world challenged, assumptions upon which we base our actions and interactions with others. Challenging students to recognize and think about their own assumptions is hard work. Similarly, breaking patterns of learning (rote memorization and "multiple guess" testing) that have been established through the primary and secondary schools is difficult and labor-intensive for both student and teacher. Accordingly, not all students will always like General Education courses (as I conceive them, anyway). Therefore, I think Bruce is absolutely right to challenge us to think about the possibilities offered by the new Liberal Studies program.

The new Liberal Studies Program will require students to take "Perspectives" courses, both as freshmen and at the upper level. We should NOT respond with warmed-over surveys. Instead, we must take up the opportunity provided by Liberal Studies to develop specifically focused courses on special topics, courses organized around consistent and coherent themes. These kinds of courses will encourage in-depth examination of specific issues, fostering the type of critical thinking that leads to active, informed citizens and more successful careers. These courses would also address the issue of holding student interest more than our current General Education courses seem to do by allowing more in-depth consideration of disciplinary issues and addressing issues of contemporary concern to students. As a great example of this focused approach, I would point to the interdisciplinary collaboration of Cynthia Atterholt and Scott Philyaw, who are planning to teach two "linked" General Education courses in Chemistry and History, using the link of the environment to pull together two disciplines not normally associated with each other.

Finally, the administration also faces a challenge. If faculty members are to take Liberal Studies seriously, the administration must cut the redtape that currently stymies innovation. It must streamline the new course approval process so that it doesn't take inordinate amounts of work and time to introduce these new courses; innovative approaches like interdisciplinary courses must be made easier to initiate. Without a corresponding commitment from the administration, the new Liberal Studies program will not differ much from the previous curriculum.

Craig Pepin, Department of History

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Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 12, No. 5

February 1, 2000

At Western Carolina University, Teaching Count\$

A peculiar aspect of state employment is that, for better or worse, our salaries are a matter of public record. Chancellor Bardo has repeatedly told us that we need to "assume a larger role" in matters concerning our professional lives at WCU. One very large matter is salary, and it behooves us to take some responsibility when it comes to our annual increases. This requires that we know how the annual merit pie is sliced. Hence my foray into the statistical nuances of the BD-119.

The following analysis is based on the 1999 salary increases of 235 full-time rank and file faculty members. Individuals on phased retirement, new appointments, instructors, department heads, and administrators including associate deans were excluded, as was a faculty member who changed departments. In cases of promotions, the portions of the salary associated with the increase in rank were deducted.

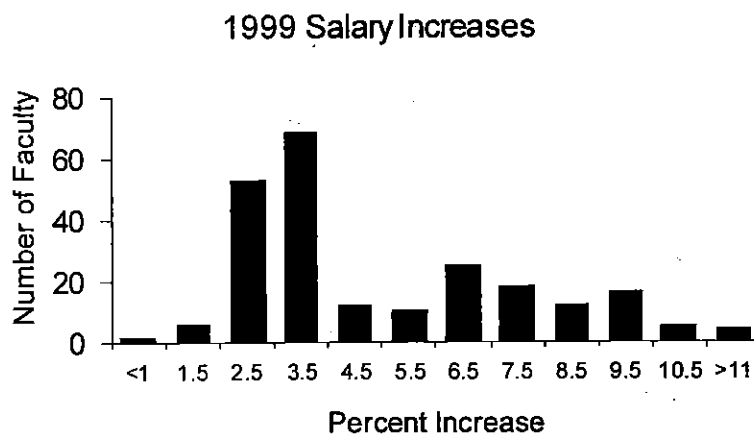
In 1999 the average salary increase at WCU was 4.9%. The median (50th percentile) was 3.5%. These percentages translated into an average increase of \$2,412 (median = \$1,825). Naturally, the increases varied widely, ranging from 0% to 14% and, in dollars, from zero to \$6,679. Faculty in the four colleges differed in the magnitude of their raises (Table 1).

College	Number	Average %	Median %	Average Increase	Median Increase
Business	40	4.6%	4.4%	\$3,065	\$2,912
Applied Sciences	39	4.8%	3.7%	\$2,449	\$1,975
Arts and Sciences	106	5.3%	3.5%	\$2,283	\$1,700
Education/Allied Profs.	50	4.5%	3.3%	\$2,144	\$1,433

Last year, the North Carolina General Assembly weighed in on the salary distribution process. Consistent with their penchant for simple solutions to complex issues of which they know nothing, our elected representatives determined that the way to enhance the educational experience of undergraduates in the UNC system was to reward teaching in a big way. To this end, they augmented a general performance-based merit increase averaging 3% with a substantial supplement specifically earmarked to reward "teaching excellence." On our campus the supplement amounted to \$198,467. The legislature was explicit as to how the teaching reward funds were to be divvied out on each campus:

1. Any increases for teaching excellence were to be over and above the 3% (average) merit raise.
2. The increases were to be at least \$1,200.
3. No more than a third of the faculty at any campus could be given the teaching supplement.

As a consequence of this policy, meaningful differences in percentage increases at WCU last year were based almost entirely on teaching. In short, the General Assembly, by legislative fiat, did an end run around our departmental AFE processes in which service and research are significant components of the reward system. The number of faculty receiving various levels of salary increase is indicated in the graph below by the vertical bars. Note that each bar actually represents a range of percentages (for example, the bar labeled "3.5%" actually includes faculty with raises between 3.0 and 3.9 percent). While the bulk of the faculty received increases in the 3 to 4 percent range, a substantial number got increases of 6% or greater based almost exclusively on performance in the classroom.



But just what is excellent teaching, and who does it? The General Assembly actually specified two mechanisms that should be used to identify excellent teachers. The first was through, to quote their directive, "the regular process of annual review or teaching evaluation procedures including student evaluations and peer review...." The second was through teaching awards. At WCU, teaching awards were the preferred mechanism for allotting the salary supplement. For example, in the College of Education and Allied Professions, salary increases above about 3% were distributed to teaching award winners proportionately to the prestige of their award. In the College of Business, on the other hand, the supplemental funds were divided equally among 16 award winners and nominees. Both of these policies met the spirit and the letter of the General Assembly's mandate.

There can be, however, unintended consequences to even the most well-intentioned legislative initiatives. At WCU, teaching awards effectively determined the vast majority of substantial pay increases last year. The result was considerably skewed salary increases. In one department, for example, five teaching award winners got 63% of the available increase money, leaving nine faculty to share the remaining 37%. This pattern was not uncommon. Of the 235 individuals included in this analysis, 35% received pay increases of 6% or higher. This meant that 65% of our faculty wound up splitting 41% of the total pot.

The legislature's mandate dramatically increased the cash value of teaching awards. Having been a nominee or winner of a college or university level teaching award nomination in the sometimes distant past was worth, on average, an additional salary increase of \$2,025. And the great thing about this money is that, unlike the original monetary award, it goes in your salary--forever. Were this policy to continue next year, finalists for the Chancellor's Distinguished Teaching Award who stay at WCU for 15 years will be \$38,792 richer if we include the effects of compounding (and assuming 3% annual increases).

Because teaching awards have been elevated to a high stakes game, we need to pay careful attention to how they are awarded. I discussed this problem a couple of years ago in the *Faculty Forum* and have no wish to revisit the topic. I cannot resist, however, pointing out that chance plays a major role in being nominated. Granted, there are among us a few genuinely extraordinary teachers who are consistent contenders for university level awards. But the truth is that for most of us, teaching award nominations are a hit and miss proposition in which longevity counts--the more years we have in the game, the more likely we are to have a couple of livewire students who bother to fill out the forms. New faculty are not even eligible for the university level awards; you must be tenured to be considered for the Board of Governors' Award and at least in your third year to be nominated for the Chancellor's Award. This means that that in one college, not one of the 18 faculty members who received an increase of 5% or more had been hired within the last five years.

Who is responsible for this sorry state of affairs? Not the deans and department heads. For the most part, they distributed the funds as directed by the General Assembly. Each spring, they are thrust into a no-win situation as they struggle to rate their colleagues for merit increases. Several studies have shown that college professors are particularly susceptible to Garrison Keilor's "Lake Wobegon Effect"--almost all of us are convinced that we are above average, especially when it comes to teaching. Unfortunately, by definition, half of us--believe it or not--are below average. Widespread disgruntlement among the troops is the inevitable consequence of a salary system often based on trivial differences in faculty rankings.

Is it the General Assembly's fault? Of course. Remember they are the bozos who in the last couple of years have managed to put the state half a billion dollars in the red in the midst of unprecedented prosperity.

Ultimately, however, the faculty are also culpable. Granted, last year's problems were exacerbated by legislative lunacy. But, they are also symptomatic of the larger issues that Henry Mainwaring so cogently brought to our attention last February. At that time, the Faculty Senate resolved to establish a means to systematically analyze our salary distribution system. While this has not yet been done, representatives of the faculty (Kinnear and Mainwaring) recently met with the deans of the colleges, the director of the library, and Vice Chancellor Collings to begin a discussion of changes in our allocation process. More meetings are scheduled. Keep tuned.

There are a couple of other things that we can do to enhance the perception of fairness when it comes to pay. First, we can encourage each of the deans to respect the February 18, 1999 Senate resolution and, following the lead of the College of Arts and Sciences, establish faculty advisory committees on salary structure and distribution. Second, we can remember that it is the faculty's responsibility to establish the reward criteria within their own departments. Departmental AFE documents are revised annually and this year are due on the Vice-Chancellor's desk by April 14th. In the next couple of months, those involved would do well to take the review process seriously this year.

In the meantime, can someone tell me who is in charge of the bell tower carillon? I want to have the Ray Charles classic "Them That Gots Is Them That Gets" added to the play list.

Hal Herzog, Psychology

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Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "At Western Carolina University, Teaching Count\$," by Hal Herzog,
2/1/00

Hal's focus on salaries and merit raises was researched and bold. This is America, where open discussion of income is far more taboo than talking about sex or religion, so I appreciated his courage. Hal has picked up well where Henry Mainwaring left off last year.

If I go on to compare the inequities in merit raises in Academic Affairs to those in Student Affairs, I would likely detract from Hal's focused argument and his positively proposed solutions. However, I might spark some bonding between employees of the two divisions.

If I go on to research this infamous BD119 by asking a librarian to help me interpret the data, I might have to treat for depression after the librarian recovers from the shock of seeing these salaries in print. (My clinical experience suggests that viewing extremely low AND extremely high salaries can result in feelings of hopelessness and despair.)

If I go on to note that SPA employees (which are the majority of positions here at Western) saw their first merit raise in about a decade as a 1% one-time merit "bonus" two years ago, I would not only detract from Hal's message, but also possibly spark some EPA-SPA sparring, I fear.

If I go on to note that **we have countless hardworking, full-time employees in housekeeping, support staff, and physical plant positions who make an annual income of less than 3 times the RAISES** that some of the faculty in the College of Business received last year, I might be fired on the grounds that I was starting a revolution.

And if I conclude this response with the cliché "inequities are part of life" or "everybody always wants more money," then I am beyond cynicism and hope. And I'm not. We need to identify places where changes are possible and meaningful and then work for them. Open discussion is the start.

In the meantime, can someone tell me who is in charge of the bell tower carillon? I want to have the civil rights' classic "We Shall Overcome" added to the play list.

Kudos, Hal.

Chris Gunn, Counseling & Psychological Services

Teaching awards turn us into back-stabbing, ego-centric, and petty prostitutes. Abolish them and any salary determinations based on them. Whatever happened to "learning" as the principal criterion to measure what we and our students accomplish? Learning takes place when students seek to acquire new skills, knowledge, and abilities with the assistance of learning facilitators (us). What if, instead of spending every possible moment with students in the process of facilitating their learning, we actively sought teaching awards by doing the things it takes to win such awards? Here's a radical alternative to teaching awards and teaching salary supplements. Due to the inability of the university to measure learning (we don't even attempt it), why not use hours spent with students as a determination for salary determinations. Not hours according to classroom meetings, actual hours.

John Moore, Communication and Theater Arts



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 12, No. 6

March 1, 2000

Effective Teaching or Convincing Performance?

I have studied the new "Policies For Evaluating Teaching," which was recently approved by the Faculty Senate. I find one thing about these policies very disturbing. We say that the most important component of Western's existence is the student-teacher teaching and learning relationship. Yet, the policies fail to include the measuring of student learning. The document defines teaching "in terms of the following dimensions: Content Expertise, Instructional Delivery Skills, Instructional Design Skills, Course Management Skills, Evaluation of Students, Faculty/Student Relationship, and Facilitation of Student Learning." These seven "dimensions" equate teaching to the actions of the instructor—that is, putting on a good show on paper and in front of the class. Teaching, however, does not occur unless student learning occurs, and this may or may not have much to do with the approved teacher behavior as defined by these seven "dimensions."

First and foremost, the most effective teacher in a given course is the one who effects the most student learning in that course. Any measure of teaching effectiveness must be centered around the measuring of student learning; anything else is merely political. Not only are these policies not centered around the measurement of student learning, but measuring student learning is not even mentioned in them. The buzzwords "Facilitation of Student Learning" are used in the document, but this is not tied to the measurement of student learning.

The "Policies" indicate that the evaluation of teaching should use "data" (and I use the term very loosely) by student evaluations, from an instructor's report, and from a review of that report by colleagues. This is nothing new, for that is precisely the long standing AFE procedure.

But, no matter how students evaluate us, no matter how we evaluate ourselves, no matter how other observers evaluate us, no matter how closely our actions match the opinions of those who are telling us what an effective teacher should and should not do in the class room, we cannot know what kind of job we are doing without knowing how much our students are learning. Yet, determining degrees of teaching effectiveness is a major factor in how we are ranked among our colleagues and how we are paid.

We are professional educators, so it is our business to determine what common core of knowledge, skills, etc., a student should gain from a course, and measuring the degree to which this is accomplished should be the way that an instructor's teaching effectiveness is ranked. Since this is our profession, we better be able to do this. However, if for some reason we conclude that student learning cannot be measured for a given course, then we should admit that teaching effectiveness cannot be measured for that course and then move on.

During the Faculty Senate meeting at which the "Policies" were approved, it was said by certain senators that sometimes an instructor may do everything right but because of the quality and/or attitudes of the students, there may not be much student learning going on; thus, teacher actions and not student learning should be the basis for evaluating teaching. Clearly, an instructor

may do everything right and get poor student evaluations. This is why student evaluations should be eliminated.

Others at the Senate meeting said that teacher actions and not student learning should be the basis of evaluating teaching because measuring student learning was just too difficult. So we take the easy way out? Is it really too difficult, or is it clear that by measuring student learning, we would find out some things that we do not want to admit?

Experts on teaching and learning in the college classroom have studied student entry characteristics, task characteristics, instructional methods, student motivation, student cognition, and student involvement in self-regulated learning as factors contributing to academic performance and have concluded that instructional methods play only a minor role in academic performance. Thus, it is unlikely that the true teaching effectiveness of a given instructor during a given year can be measured accurately using information collected during that single year. There are too many variables to account for. To get a true and accurate measurement of teaching effectiveness, one needs to track relevant measures over several years.

It all comes down to the fact that our procedure for evaluating teaching effectiveness continues to be based on promoting ourselves, that is, convincing the appropriate people (including our students) that we put on a good show regardless of how much or how little our students learn. I fear that this proposal is an attempt to rationalize the current procedure of giving raises and awards based on subjective measures of teacher performance as perceived by individuals who control such rewards, rather than basing them on the more objective reality of the amount of learning taking place.

The best teachers that I ever had were the nonconformists. They were the scholars who did not bow to the pressures of pleasing all those who thought they could define the art of teaching in some closed form. They knew what should be learned in their courses and they held their students responsible for those standards. Instead of being forced to conform to someone's fixed definition of good teaching, I would wish to be judged by the amount of learning which takes place in my classes.

Recently, the University of South Carolina and the University of Saskatchewan conducted a study which asked 406 students to rate the importance of enthusiasm, rapport, learning, course difficulty, organization, breadth, group interaction, assignments, and examinations as factors of teaching effectiveness. Consideration of these factors led the students to rate student learning as the most important factor. Unfortunately, within a classroom situation where personalities come into play, students are often unable to evaluate these factors objectively. If the students say that learning is most important and we know that learning is most important, then why do we not use some objective measure of student learning as our basis of evaluating teaching effectiveness? Why do we "attempt" to measure instructional methods, something which has little effect on academic performance and can not be measured accurately, when we could measure end results? Why? Because it is easier to reward the people we wish to reward rather than the people who produce the best results. So, the rich get richer, the poor get poorer, and the students get short changed.

Richard Stephens, Math and Computer Science

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Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "Effective Teaching or Convincing Performance?" by Richard Stephens, 3/1/00

There is a series of five articles on student ratings of professors in the November 1997 issue of the American Psychologist. Several of these articles are relevant to issues Dr. Stephens has raised.

Anonymous

If I understand Richard's point, he is saying that student learning should determine teaching effectiveness. He doesn't use the word, but could he possibly mean grades? If so, is a "good" teacher then one whose entire class learns the material well enough to make grades of A? Should we base "teaching" rewards on grade reports? Isn't this what the category "evaluation of students" is about? I would certainly question (and have) the teaching effectiveness of someone whose students consistently make more Ds and Fs than passing grades, or whose students consistently withdraw from the professor's courses in high proportions.

I think maybe part of the problem lies in some faculty not knowing how to write a syllabus with measurable outcome objectives based on what the student will learn. With this foundation, it is then possible to write evaluation measures that yield grades that are an accurate reflection of student learning in the course. These measures can include multiple-choice exams, essay exams, short papers, long papers, classroom presentations, clinical performance--whatever is appropriate to the material and methods for which learning must be demonstrated.

Here we are back at the question (rarely asked, I fear) of whether high achievement in one's discipline (doctorate, lots of research, lots of publications, etc.) is sufficient to prepare a competent teacher. Where is the examination of faculty vitae for credentials in how to teach? If new faculty have never had the opportunity to learn the mechanics of effective learner evaluation, is it not our job to teach them? Who mentors someone who has never written test questions or criteria for performance or, Mager help us, a comprehensive course syllabus? Maybe our New Faculty Orientation could incorporate some of these skills, and those who come with them could assist those who don't. As for the faculty who have been with us forever and still don't know how to teach so students learn, I guess we can only pray that they retire soon.

Sharon Jacques, Nursing

Richard Stephens' commentary "Effective Teaching or Convincing Performance?" seems to focus on two issues: (1) that the Policies for Evaluating Teaching "fail to include the measuring of student learning" and (2) that the evaluation of teaching based on student assessments of teaching, instructor's report, and collegial review of teaching is nothing new at WCU. I would like to comment briefly on each of these issues.

The literature on teaching and the measurement of student learning is voluminous. Many attempts have been made to quantify teaching and learning, but so far none has resulted in any objective measures that can be used to evaluate student learning. What has been accomplished is that researchers agree that there are some major elements of effective teaching that contribute and facilitate student learning. These are the major elements that are identified in the document. Currently there is no effective way of determining just how much a student has "learned" at a given time. How, for example, do you determine how much a student has learned who progresses from level X to level Y compared to a student who progresses from level Z to level N? A test would probably indicate the latter, but has that student really "learned" more? Or there is the student who "learns" a few facts compared to another student who learns a lot of facts. The student who "learned" a few facts internalizes those facts and incorporates them into his/her knowledge base whereas the other student does not. Which student "learned" more and how and who determines how much was "learned"? This raises another question. Is "learning" the ultimate outcome of teaching or is there another level that

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Responses to ""Effective Teaching or Convincing Performance?," by Richard Stephens," 3/1/00, continued

goes beyond "learning"? Back in college I had a professor (also a nonconformist) who lamented the fact that there were a lot of people in the world who were instructed but few who were educated. This concept of "educated" is also embodied in the German word *Bildung--die Einheit von Halting, Koennen und Wissen, die sich ein zuechtvoller Mensch erwirb* (the integration of character, skills, and knowledge that a disciplined individual develops over time). This implies that learning is only one step in a long process of becoming educated. If indeed this is true, then how and when do you measure the ultimate outcome of learning?

Though it may be true in theory that the evaluation of teaching based on student assessments of teaching, instructor's report, and collegial review of teaching is nothing new at Western Carolina, this kind of evaluation is not what always occurs in practice. Again, the literature indicates that evaluations are more valid if data are gathered from several sources, each with a different perspective. Researchers tend to agree that these sources should at least include students, colleagues, and self but can also include others. Although student assessments alone are not a very reliable source of information, if they are used in conjunction with other information--and if the instruments are properly structured--student assessments can provide a perspective that can only be supplied by students. Thus the Task Force felt that input from these three sources into the evaluation process would not only yield more objective results but would also create more consistency across campus.

Is this the perfect document? No. Is it chiseled in stone? No. Is it a living document that can be revised and improved? Yes. It was the hope of the Task Force that this document would be the first step towards creating a more equitable and consistent process for evaluating teaching at Western Carolina University and that it would not be considered the final word.

Anita K. Oser, Chair, Task Force on Evaluating Teaching

Richard Stephens' *Faculty Forum* piece on evaluating teaching provided a provocative point of departure for the Talking about Teaching group on March 3. Our conversation went in several directions. We didn't necessarily go away with answers, but we did have a good talk about teaching. Some of the ideas that came out of the discussion were as follows:

- Some disciplines and professions focus more on processes, skills and applications than on factual information. Evaluation procedures for teaching and learning may need to take these differences into account.
- You can learn something about how effective a teacher is by watching the students' body language. Alert, active students suggest an engaging teacher; slouching, inactive students suggest a boring teacher.
- Good teaching often includes a variety of approaches. Lectures, small group problem solving, role-playing, and other methods can all be effective. The best teachers are skilled at selecting and sometimes changing methods to meet the needs of the learning situation.
- Teachers teach who they are. (Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*)
- Evaluating teaching is a problem without a perfect solution. The policies passed by the Faculty Senate last fall give us a reasonable approximation of what we mean by good teaching.
- Teaching and learning – the doing and evaluating of them – are inextricably intertwined.
- We often talk about "covering the material." Maybe we need to change our thinking and talk more about how to help students uncover the material.

*Talk About Teaching Group:
Sharon Dole, Mary Jean Herzog, Marsha Holmes,
Dixie McGinty, Terry Nienhuis, Chloe Little, Ben Ward*



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

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Teaching Count\$ Reconsidered

Hal Herzog's February 1, 2000, *Faculty Forum* piece sees a problem with salary merit increases, particularly the raises directly targeted for teaching excellence. While Hal does not place all of the blame for this state of affairs on external sources, he does place most of the onus there. I suggest that we need to look internally to both identify the problem and to move in the direction of resolving it. But first a little history.

Because of public questions about the quality of academic instruction and its role in the tenure process, the Board of Governors, November 1992, referred the matter to two standing committees. As a result of their work the committees produced a report, approved by the Board September 10, 1993, titled *Tenure and Teaching in the University of North Carolina*. One of the major recommendations was to review evaluation procedures to ensure that teaching was being properly evaluated. Another was the recommendation that established the Board of Governors' Awards for Excellence in Teaching, a \$10,000 award at each of the sixteen institutions. Yet another was to ensure that the importance of teaching was specified in the mission statement. The report was immediately followed by Executive Memorandum 338, September 28, 1993, signed by then President C.D. Spangler. Memorandum 338 repeated the instructions given to the President by the Board of Governors. Part of the motivation for the Board's action was to head off any inclination by the General Assembly to meddle in these matters. The attempt failed.

In the 1995 expansion budget session the General Assembly passed House Bill 229, ratified as Chapter 24 of 1995 sessions law. Section 15.9 says, in part, "The Board of Governors shall direct constituent institutions that teaching be given primary consideration in making faculty personnel decisions regarding tenure, teaching, and promotional decisions for those positions for which teaching is the primary responsibility." Section 116.1 puts into law the mission of the University of North Carolina. It states, in part, that "Teaching and learning constitute the primary service that the university renders to society. Teaching, or instruction, is the primary responsibility of each of the constituent institutions."

Since 1995 the General Assembly has on several occasions, including 1999, earmarked funds specifically for the purpose of rewarding excellence in teaching. In a rather unique exercise the state has tied rewards to stated policy. Amazing! The intent of the policy is to focus faculty attention on how seriously external constituencies take this matter of quality teaching and, lo and behold, it is working! As Hal points out, there is serious money at stake.

There are two alternatives. The first is that the faculty could attempt to change state policy. This would entail a level of political activism that I have not seen a hint of in Western's faculty. Imagine Western's faculty going public and battling with the General Assembly declaring that the quality of instruction, and therefore student learning, is NOT our primary purpose.

Hal does point out that the faculty are to some degree culpable, but I suggest that we are more culpable than that. Given that the state has specified the policy and tied real rewards to it, the

second alternative is a course of action to ensure that the rewards are distributed to those who deserve them. In other words, let us evaluate teaching and learning in such a way that there is a degree of faith that those so rewarded are deserving. As Hal also points out, the *Faculty Handbook* gives departmental faculty the responsibility for annually reviewing and revising, as needed, the departmental AFE/TPR document. This document is supposed to be the document which contains the criteria that form the basis for personnel decisions. These criteria are signed off on, in writing, by the dean and the VCAA. As a faculty, let us insist that the properly prepared and approved criteria are the criteria by which such decisions are really made.

If the above were to be the case then the departmental AFE/TPR documents need a lot of work. I served on a committee several years ago that reviewed almost all of the departments' criteria and more than a few left much to be desired. In October 1999, the Faculty Senate approved the Task Force on Evaluating Teaching report titled *Proposed Policies for Evaluating Teaching*. In a March 15, 2000, email Vice Chancellor Collings said, "These policies will be implemented during the next academic year." Departmental faculty have a choice. The faculty can do a good job developing teaching assessment methods and criteria or it can do a poor job. To assist in this effort, I suggest that the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs hold department heads and deans accountable for the quality of the documents and the integrity of the personnel decision making process. The accountability should be such that it is visible to the faculty and perceived as fair.

Richard Stephens', *Faculty Forum*, March 1, 2000, raises the question of whether we should be evaluating the professor's teaching or the student's learning. In the March 15, 2000, *notes and quotes*, Anita Oser responded to Richard, explaining why the Task Force on Evaluating Teaching took the direction it did. A multi-dimensional evaluation of the professor's performance is certainly an improvement over what we have been doing. However, I have some empathy with Richard's position. I also know that evaluating student learning has its own pitfalls. As an institution whose rhetoric espouses the value of teaching excellence, let us explore ways to evaluate the teaching and learning relationship so that the equation contains all the variables. Evaluating only one side of the equation, whichever one it is, only tells part of the story.

Outcomes assessment is a good idea but our latest SACS accreditation report (1996) indicated that many departments have yet to develop an effective assessment plan. Could WCU faculty produce a developmental model of learning that could be used to assess the developmental impact of a course, as well as our curriculum, both in content and process? Such a model would have the capability of assessing multiple pedagogies, compared to most current assessments which focus on teaching as "telling." If we could simultaneously focus on teacher learning and student learning, perhaps we could find the instrument that would make short work of this unruly knot.

One other action that the faculty can take is to revise the way teaching awards are determined. There is good reason to believe that some teaching award finalists are the result of successful manipulation. Teaching awards, merit money, or any other personnel decision should not be based on behind-the-scenes shenanigans. Teaching awards should be based on proper and careful assessments of merit. The faculty should insist on it.

The larger question of salary inequities will certainly not be resolved by much better evaluation of teaching, but it could certainly be a big step.

Bill Kane, Management

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Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Response to "Teaching Count\$ Reconsidered," by Bill Kane, 4/1/00

Again I apologize to my esteemed colleagues for my transgressions. Last year I was a co-conspirator on the University T&P Committee and now I apologize for "...successful manipulation. . . ." and ". . . behind-the-scenes shenanigans. . ." associated with receiving teaching awards (Bill Kane, Faculty Forum, April 1, 2000; see also Herzog, Faculty Forum, Nov. 1996). All these years I thought I was just trying to do an adequate job teaching chemistry; shame on me!

The irony of the current, appropriate debate concerning the disproportionate raises for "teachers" is that we had this debate for the first 20 years of my sordid career here EXCEPT that "researchers" were the favored class and "teachers" the underclass or at least overlooked class. "Researchers" were assigned lighter teaching loads (certainly not gen ed) that beget publications that beget grants that beget summer salary that beget more released time that beget more publications and beget disproportionately larger raises. The "teachers" had heavier teaching loads (yup, gen ed) thus fewer publications. . . yadda, yadda, yadda. . . and smaller raises. The discussions concerning how to evaluate researchers enlivened the campus and energized the local AFT union. It will take another ten years of inequities in raises for the "teachers" to catch up with the "researchers". Any ideas on what it would take us to catch up with the salaries in your college, Bill?

Anonymous (email: poolg@wcu.edu)

Bill Kane is right. In his analysis of last year's salary increases, Hal Herzog did not go far enough placing the responsibility for the inequities in the distribution of last year's teaching supplement on the heads of the deans and department heads. Granted, the legislature should not be meddling in our AFE process. However, they did not actually specify that these funds should be given to teaching award winners. Indeed, the legislature clearly indicated that the funds could be allotted via each campuses' standard AFE procedures. The nutty idea of distributing the money according to teaching award winners was a local decision, not a state-wide mandate.

Further, some of the deans were not honest in communicating to their faculty members just how the money was distributed. For example in my college the dean sent out a message in August to all the faculty indicating that we all got roughly the same percentage increase. At least according to Herzog's figures, this was simply not the truth. Maybe it is time to think about wresting salary decisions out of the hands of the deans and department heads altogether.

Anonymous



Faculty Forum

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Program Review and The Book of Job

Willa Cather once wrote that there are only three or four "stories" and that we each live out at least one of them. Certainly one of the great stories is Job. The plight of the WCU Philosophy Program is really small potatoes on the world scene, but when I read the final report of the Program Review Committee it seemed to me, in its small way, that our case was so similar to the plight of that ancient man, Job. This is a story about teaching because for most of us at the university teaching what we love is why we are here. If we had wanted a really big salary we would have done something else. All of the people who were undergraduate philosophy majors with me make much more money than I do. They are lawyers, doctors, bankers, etc. I went into teaching philosophy and religion because I believe students need to think about important questions that have little to do with money and all to do with life. This is also an essay on teaching because I believe that people who are prevented from teaching what they love and only have the opportunity to teach entry level classes will burn out quickly and lose their love of teaching. Reducing some faculty to teaching only service courses creates a caste system in which some faculty are not only compensated more generously for their work, but, more importantly, some faculty exist only to serve other majors. This may create other people besides me, who, struck with the spirit of prophecy (or whining), want to "play Job."

The Book of Job is divided into four parts: a prose prologue, a poetic section in which Job is comforted, a second poetic section in which Job receives an answer from God, and a prose epilogue. I will only discuss the first two sections because the last sections, the final answer from God and the prose epilogue have yet to be played. The Program Review Committee gets three roles in my story--God, the comforters, and Satan. (Satan, only in what biblical scholars argue is the earliest meaning of Satan: the adversary, the one who speaks against, who accuses. This is certainly the proper role of the Program Review Committee, to examine and accuse programs and weed out those that do not measure up. It is not until hundreds of years later, in the Apocalyptic Literature, that Satan takes on the role of demon).

I. Prologue

In the prologue God is walking among his court in heaven and meets Satan, the accuser. God points out Job to Satan as an example of a fine fellow and Satan challenges God on this point. God allows Satan to torment Job. All this goes on unbeknownst to poor Job, who is having a great life until he is told that he has lost everything--including his children. Job deals with this torment but then God gives Satan power over Job's body and Job is driven to the ground where he sits and laments his fate.

II. First Poetic Section

The committee of "comforters"--Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and finally, Elihu--show up and try to explain to Job why God has canceled his life. It is important to note that none of the members of this committee are in Job's position. Job speaks to God as well as to his "comforters."

Job: Woe is me; why has this happened to us? We lose our life. Wouldst Thou take our children away from us?

Eliphaz: Verily, you philosophers have sinned; ye have been weighed in the balance and found wanting. Ye have fallen below the sacred numbers of graduates set forth in the holy law from Board of Governors. But why lamenteth thou so; ye will not lose your jobs.

Job: Jobs! Have ye never regarded the holy numbers in the blessed BD 119? We are philosophers; we are paid among the least of God's servants. We chose to do this for the love of philosophy, not money. And Thou wouldst take from us our children without whom little philosophy will come to pass in the valley of Cullowhee. Thou wouldst slay us unto the fourth generation. We may never return. For did not great Aristotle say philosophy requireth others?

Bildad: But ye had not many. Behold the legions of Marketing and CJ majors.

Job: Blessed be they. But our children were beautiful and they did go out into the world, even to law school, and graduate schools of diverse types, and some, yea, even unto jobs. For it is written in the sacred statistics that philosophy majors do score well on LSAT, and GMAT, and GRE, and MCAT even unto the highest levels. And they are admitted more than most others into these sacred vocations.

Zophar: But not many at Western hearkened to your call to major.

Job: We had not much time. Only seven years hence were we made a major. Verily, is it not written by the prophet, "Thou must raiseth the bar," and is not part of this raising expectations? The other day I did speak unto my intro religion class asking: "verily, how many of ye would be doctors?" And not a one did speak but only did they say that one does not aspire to be a doctor from Western. Should this not change? And can we not help? And is it not written that we shouldst have "excellence with a personal touch?"

Elihu: Yea, flaunt not your strength sinner. Your upper division classes are under enrolled.

Job: Not really, only some. Our average achieveth unto 13 in such courses, which transcendeth the holy number 10. And if Thee would but count general education we teach well over 20 a course. Yeah, in these courses we do teach 35. Do we gain no merit in Thine eyes for all these freshmen we do teach? We have sworn that in the new Liberal Studies we will make all our courses available and yet Thou wouldst still slay us. Why? Of what profit is this to Thee or to Western? If we teach the classes and it costeth thee not, wherefore wilt Thou not give us a major? Why dost Thou still torment us? Wouldst be good for Thee to take some logic to clear thy head. Are we not now regionally relevant and have the comparative advantage over the Philistines at App and the Hittites in the city of Asheville? For we now have environmental ethics. What else wouldst Thou that we do? Wherein do we still offend Thee? We were accused of not being planted in this region, of no comparative advantage, of having some under enrolled major classes. But in Thy sacred decrees you say these are no longer our offences. Yet ye wouldst still slay us. Oh that I could plead my case before Thee, but Thou decrees Thy reports from afar and Thou slayest us from afar.

Conclusion

Job does not accept the reasons of the comforters because they just don't make sense. In the final report the committee says our plans for environmental ethics and environmental philosophy "represent a major potential for comparative advantage," and "the move to offer upper division liberal studies credit is likely to have a positive effect on upper-level course enrollments" (already most of our classes are not under enrolled; in the future, none of them will be.) Yet they still want to kill the major. If we are able to offer most upper level courses as liberal studies under the new program and the major doesn't cost the university anything why can't we have a philosophy major? "It doesn't cost much so keep it" was the committee's decision about International Business. If this university aspires to be anything like a community of scholarship, there needs to be a good deal more dialogue on the direction we are going to take. I'm encouraged by some things I have heard in the last few weeks. And, of course, God does eventually speak to Job. It may not have been a very satisfactory answer, but it was personal. Like some other Jobs in this university I am hoping for wiser and more benevolent gods than produced what I've read in the report. We are waiting for god(ot?).

Job McLachlan, Coordinator, Philosophy and Religion