



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 17, No. 2

October 1, 2004

Administration and Faculty: the Seamless Learning Environment

Recently, the American College Personnel Association and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators—the two major professional groups serving student affairs administrators—published Learning Reconsidered: a Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience. The publication proposes “the integrated use of all of higher education’s resources in the education and preparation of the whole student.” At Western Carolina University, the Division of Student Affairs works closely not only with the Office of Academic Affairs but with the teaching faculty to try to make this integration take place. The goal is to create a “seamless learning environment.”

The basic assumptions about student learning which student affairs professionals hold should be consistent with the goals of all administrative and teaching personnel:

- * Learning consists of both cognitive and affective aspects.
- * Students bring to our institution a variety of learning styles, instructional delivery preferences, and social-emotional needs.
- * The worth, dignity, and uniqueness of each student should be respected and supported within the learning and living environment.
- * Students learn best when a variety of individual and group learning experiences are available to them.
- * Learning is a life-long process, and everyone in the university must help students cultivate “skills for living.”

The idea of a campus-wide focus on student learning necessarily suggests ways in which all university administrators and faculty can collaborate. Unfortunately, on many campuses, we still operate as departmental silos despite our own rhetoric to the contrary. We tend to think that “being friendly” is enough for effective collaboration. It’s not. At Western Carolina University many partnerships between administrative units and faculty are underway. Our cooperative work on retention is obvious. Less obvious, perhaps, is that, in cooperation with Academic Affairs, the office of Student Affairs has initiated a Faculty Fellows Program whereby selected faculty members with an interest in service learning or academic integrity issues will have an opportunity to work with the Service Learning Department or the Office of Student Judicial Affairs. Thus, strong connections are made between community service opportunities and the curriculum so students can become truly engaged learners. In the judicial affairs area, the objective is to develop a

more integrated approach to the handling of academic dishonesty matters. Consider the teaching of USI 130, where several members of the Student Affairs staff have joined faculty and academic affairs administrators in the delivery of our academic survival skills course for new students. Consider the Faculty-in-Residence Program in our new 300-bed residence hall. Increasing the faculty presence in the residence hall, enhancing faculty contact with students, and offering educational programs in the residence hall will reinforce the centrality of academics to student success. A new Master's Degree Program in College Student Personnel, coordinated in concert with the College of Education and Allied Professions, will help prepare students to work in the broad field of Student Affairs administration.

At Western Carolina University, the work of administrators helps assure that faculty members have a steady stream of students to fill their classrooms. Once students arrive at Western, they should find meaning in both their academic and co-curricular experiences because of administrative and faculty collaboration. Our work together helps ensure the fiscal stability of the institution and specific academic departments through improved student retention. Hopefully, our partnerships and impact on retention also elevate faculty morale and esprit de corps. Faculty members in departments with full classes, solid resources for professional development, and adequate salary increases will be those who flourish and contribute meaningfully to Western's academic mission.

We must continue to work on bridging the famous divide among academic affairs, student affairs, and faculty. Student affairs professionals must establish liaisons with each of the colleges and departments to explore common ground, identify classes in which experiential learning opportunities in student affairs can enhance instruction, offer awards to faculty for efforts to intentionally integrate teaching with the activities of student affairs, support the Coulter Faculty Center in its efforts to reshape the teaching-learning dynamic, and strongly encourage students to actively participate in the life of the mind through undergraduate research and creative opportunities with faculty, academic honoraries, internships, and study abroad opportunities.

Citizens throughout the country have demanded that institutions of higher education produce students with the critical skills they need for work in the 21st century. Student Affairs professionals play a key collaborative role with faculty and academic administrators, not only through the services and programs they provide but also through their impact on student learning. We now share—and must continue to share—in the challenge of producing learning outcomes which can help students succeed and gain a thirst for lifelong learning.

Now, more than ever, student affairs professionals have an opportunity to affect the quality of college student life and learning as well as the very vitality of our educational institutions. With this forum, please suggest ways in which we can continue to do this.

Robert Caruso, Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs

Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Response to "Administration and Faculty: the Seamless Learning Environment" by Robert Caruso, 10/1/04

Kudos to Bob Caruso for focusing attention on a goal we all agree on--providing the best possible educational experience for our students. The good news, as Bob reports, is that our administrators are trying to bridge the divide between academic affairs and student affairs. The bad news is that there continue to be institutional barriers at WCU which frustrate this effort and ultimately interfere with the quality of our students' educational experiences.

Here is one example. The theater in the new University Center is an outstanding venue for visiting scholar presentations; it has great acoustics and an excellent projection system. More importantly, it is a more intimate setting than say, the auditorium in Coulter, which is often embarrassingly empty during these events. But, each time they use the room, departments (because they fall under Academic Affairs on the organizational chart) must pay fifty bucks to the University Center, which is under Student Affairs. I am told this fee goes to reimburse the cost of the student worker who turns the sound system on, sits through the program, and then turns it off. At a time when many departments are strapped for cash, this rob-Peter-to-pay-Paul policy dissuades faculty members from scheduling student-oriented programs in the room on campus most conducive to their learning experience.

I suspect that these sorts of barriers result from inane state-mandated budget procedures. However, let's hope that our administrators can find creative ways around this type of bureaucratic idiocy. After all, to paraphrase an ex-President, "It's the students, Stupid."

Hal Herzog, Psychology