



# Faculty Forum

*From The Faculty Commons for Excellence in Teaching and Learning*

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WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

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## Earth Day Reflections at Western

By David G. Henderson

There is a lot of wonderful talk these days about the environment here at Western. As part of UNC Tomorrow, we have committed to sustainability as a core institutional value and accepted the charge to “assume a leadership role in addressing the state’s energy and environmental challenges.”<sup>1</sup> We have embraced the idea that as a public institution we must be good stewards of place. This latter concept has been applied mostly to the civic and economic health of our local community, but it can scarcely be denied that being stewards of place commits us to the environmental health and ecological integrity of the land as well.

But talk is the easy part. It is easy to boast that we love the beautiful nature that surrounds us. Who wouldn’t love these mountains and this river? I often think of Aldo Leopold’s response to those who sing of their love for their country:

*Yes, but just what and who do we love? Certainly not the soil, which we are sending helter-skelter down river. Certainly not the waters, which we assume have no function except to turn turbines, float barges, and carry off sewage. Certainly not the plants, of which we exterminate whole communities without batting an eye. Certainly not the animals, of which we have already extirpated many of the largest and most beautiful species.<sup>2</sup>*

So how are we really doing? Have we put our love into practice? Of course, the answer is mixed. In some ways we are doing remarkably well, in others not so well, and in still others we are making progress. I offer these reflections, not in the spirit of a comprehensive impact assessment, but as some reasons to be proud, some reasons to be sad, and some opportunities to do better.

A clear and obvious reason to be proud of our university this Earth Day is our great improvement in energy conservation. While all the schools in the UNC system were mandated to reduce energy usage by 30%<sup>3</sup> before 2015, we were the first to reach the goal and the only school so far to maintain it. Our many efficiency projects include a stimulus-funded overhaul of the HVAC system in the HFR building. Our recycling program is strong and growing. And construction on our solar-panel tree is expected to begin this summer.

Another reason to be proud of Western is our devotion, curricular and extra-curricular, to biodiversity. Our work here includes a great deal of wildlife and botanical research, cooperative projects with the Highlands Biological Station and local protected areas, and significant outreach endeavors like the *Cullowhee Native Plants Conference*.

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<sup>1</sup> University of North Carolina Tomorrow Commission, “Executive Summary” (December 2007.)

<sup>2</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (Oxford: 1949), p. 204.

<sup>3</sup> From 2002 usage levels.

This October will see the second annual *Rooted in the Mountains Conference*, which advances the idea of land health beyond biodiversity preservation to also include the healthy situation of peoples and cultures within their ecosystems. *Rooted in the Mountains* focuses especially on the environmental challenges of our regional place, Appalachia, such as mountaintop removal mining. Unfortunately, while this conference is something to be proud of, mountaintop removal mining is an occasion for great sadness.

Despite our great strides in energy conservation, the electricity we do use comes largely from plants burning coal acquired from mountaintop removal mines. We are indirectly participating in one of the greatest environmental atrocities in American history—the wanton and utter destruction of some 500 mountains and 2000 miles of stream here in Appalachia. When I go into the McKee Building and turn on the lights in order to discuss the theories of environmental ethics and justice with our students, I am helping to destroy ecosystems and poison the water of our impoverished neighbors in West Virginia. If sustainability is really to be a core institutional value at Western, then we must care not only how much energy we use but also where it comes from.

Reflections, whether encouraging or distressing, must ultimately find their meaning in the actions they lead to. So where are the opportunities to do more and to do better?

- When feasible, join with your colleagues—from construction management to the humanities—in incorporating sustainability and environmental values into your teaching.
- Support sustainability initiatives and events on campus. Earth and Wellness Day will be on Wednesday, April 13<sup>th</sup>. More than thirty vendors and organizations will participate this year, and we will have our first tailgate farmer’s market.
- Know about local environmental and sustainability efforts off-campus, like the Jackson County Greenways Project and the Green Energy Park, so you can support them, volunteer with them and send students to them for service-learning experience.

And come join the Sustainability Council. No elections needed; we can put you to work.

*David Henderson came to WCU in August of 2008 from Texas A&M University, where he completed a Master’s Degree in Wildlife Science and a Doctorate in Philosophy. He is an Assistant Professor in the Philosophy and Religion Department and teaches “Environmental Ethics” and “American Wilderness Ethics and Aesthetics”.*



We Got  
Mail!

## **Coulter Faculty Commons for Teaching and Learning**

### **Responses to the March Faculty Forum article entitled:**

#### ***General Education at WCU: Evolutionary or Revolutionary Change?***

From: John T. West  
Professor/Associate Dean  
College of Fine and Performing Arts

I believe that all of the faculty can buy into the notion of the “well-rounded” college graduate. We would like for all of our students to be able to think and communicate clearly and effectively; to be aware of the world in which they live and work; to have some understanding of history; and at least a basic understanding and appreciation of art and culture. Beyond that, there is probably no consensus as to what should constitute a “general education.” I wish the committee good luck in their task!

My issue with Bruce’s article centers mainly around item #1 which addresses the proportion of the curriculum devoted to general education. I find some of the statistics either incorrect or misleading. As dangerous as it is to argue statistics with a researcher of Bruce’s status, my math doesn’t yield the same percentages. Our Liberal Studies (general education) program is 42 hours which is 35% of a 120 hour degree and 32.8% of a 128 degree (I hope my colleagues in math can verify this as musicians rarely have to count past 4).

The second issue is when Bruce states that our proportion of general education courses is among the smallest in our peer group. If you look at just the published number of credit hours, this may be true but there are certainly other factors to consider. Appalachian State, for example, requires 44 hours of basic studies. However, they allow programs to double count classes within majors. To use my own area as an example, music education students at App can count 9 hours that are required in the major toward the general studies requirement. Therefore, the “real” hour requirement is 35. I realize that some programs at WCU are also allowed to do this but it is inconsistent at best and requests for double counting have been denied for unfathomable reasons.

My third (and final) point is the implication that in a constantly shifting labor market, it is worthless to pursue a specific major as that field may change dramatically in the future. I would argue that the pursuit of excellence in a specific field is more important than ever. That dogged pursuit of mastery can transfer to other areas more effectively than the Platte River approach (a mile wide and an inch deep)!

My recommendation to the committee is to allow for flexibility within our general education program. Either reduce the total number of hours required or allow for significant double counting (6 – 9 hours for most degree programs). This would have the added benefit of improving our time to degree numbers and possibly even graduation rates.

----John

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## Editorial Notes

We urge you to add your comments to **Faculty Forum** articles. It enriches the faculty dialogue about these many issues that concern us all. This is a particularly poignant time for faculty at WCU, as we contemplate a new Chancellor. Please take this opportunity to add to this important discussion. You may comment to this article by clicking on this link, then select the article under **What's Hot** on the top right: <https://media.wcu.edu/groups/facultyforum/>. The command requires you to use your email username and password to access the article. The Faculty Forum is a publication by and for WCU faculty, but we do invite comments from staff, who are equally important in the pursuit of excellence here at WCU.

To access the article as a PDF, please select the article link at the following URL:  
<http://www.wcu.edu/27638.asp>.

The direct link to the main Faculty Forum Webpage is: <http://www.wcu.edu/7480.asp>.

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