



WHERE WE LIVE AND WHAT WE DO

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English

I enjoyed the recent Faculty Forum highlighting the joys of life in the Greater Cullowhee Metro Area. Many thanks to Mary Jean Herzog, and collaborators David Claxton, Chris Cooper, Brian Gastle, Hal Herzog, Libby McRae and Maurice Phipps for singing all the praises of Jackson County that I would've sung.

However, I too would like to address the sometimes-fraught issue of where faculty live. It's become common to hear talk of "encouraging" new faculty to live close by. Those of us who've been here more than a few years have almost certainly heard the complaint that further-afield faculty don't pull their weight. This assumption is hard on the Asheville-and-beyond dwellers who make the long commute *and* pull their weight; I'd like to address it for that reason, but also because it may speak to a larger, even more fraught assumption about what academic life is supposed to be. Perhaps it's time to let go of the conversation which judges job performance in terms of where people live and consider that there may be a "we should always be here" subtext to this issue

I live in in Cullowhee, 1.8 miles from WCU—yay me. That's a choice: it saves gas, time and money, and it makes life easier at every early-morning, weekend, or evening event. It also works because my spouse and I enjoy rural settings, small towns, as well as those whitewater rivers that Hal wrote about. I'm lucky to live here, and glad to have the choice to do so.

But these factors, plus a few others, constitute one situation, not a universal order; they also constitute a state of privilege. My spouse and I are tenured faculty in the same department, a situation whose odds are lower than those of winning the Publisher's Clearinghouse...but not that much lower. We don't have children (with special needs or otherwise), we don't have the primary care (yet) of elderly relatives who need specialized treatment, and we're more or less okay with work being the center of our lives. Also, we're white and heterosexual. The fact that Jackson County works so well for us proves nothing about whether it works for other people.

So when we hint to new faculty or staff that they really ought to live nearby, when we encourage them to stay in the county, what are we really asking of people whom we hope will be our friends and colleagues for the foreseeable future?

Foremost, we're asking that they subordinate their families' lives to one job. In the 1970's, with lower property values and different social values, a single WCU salary supported a non-working partner and children, and kept the bills paid in something like comfort; now it won't. Since WCU can't offer appropriate employment to all domestic partners, it's asking a lot of a family that it revolve in tight orbit around one job...in a county whose unemployment rate is 5.2%, in a state whose unemployment rate is

6.2%, and at a university many of whose salaries run low relative to comparable jobs in other states, other regions, and even other UNC schools. Some domestic partners can work in Jackson County; many can't. And there are many reasons why parents might need to live elsewhere, including childcare and health care options, school reputations and amenities, choices in home or private schooling, and what's available in accommodating special needs. These aren't trivial reasons to choose a home.

We're also asking that all of our employees love rural settings and small towns, implying that every family's structure will fit easily into traditional rural settings: white, heterosexual, married, Christian. For instance, are there any synagogues west of Asheville? And might there be good reasons why a colleague who is transgendered or gay might prefer Asheville, a city which the latest census has shown to have 83% more LGBT identified people than the typical American city or town?

Moreover, the idea of "encouragement" can be problematic. Of course we wouldn't dictate where people live, we say; but we can *encourage* them...ignoring the fact that when senior faculty and administrators "encourage" junior faculty and staff to do something, that generates a certain pressure.

"But those commuters aren't doing their *jobs!*" is the usual cry at this point. "They're never *here!* And then I have to pick up the slack!"

This seems to be the crux of faculty-on-faculty judgment about living arrangements: we feel potentially ill-done-by. I'm afraid that while I'm rewriting the DCRD and dealing with the fifth e-mail from the same student in the same day, you're out dancing.

I don't have the data to absolutely refute this charge—though I'd be very interested in seeing it, if Institutional Research chose to collect some. But if you'll excuse anecdotal evidence, I have not found it to be accurate. What I see is that *some* people are "never here" - generally difficult to find, reluctant to attend university functions or volunteer for service work, persistently invisible at their departments' and colleges' signature events and key meetings. But what I haven't seen is a clear correlation between that behavior and where people live. Some never-heres live minutes away. Plenty of go-to, can-always-find-them, utility-infielders live in Asheville or beyond; if it wouldn't embarrass them, I could name a host of such colleagues.

I'd venture to say that many faculty and staff put in well over forty hours a week—at the office, at home, when traveling. I venture this because our levels of productivity show it...and that should speak for itself. The fact that every institution has less active employees doesn't mean we should be suspicious of everyone in Asheville or Murphy; it means that the criterion of judgment should be whether we're doing our jobs—period. If we're not, that's for department heads and supervisors to address. We have documents with which to address it.

So maybe it's time to stop worrying about where our colleagues live? It's not like any of us lacks for other things to do, or other issues to worry about.

But I'd like to close by returning to a larger question: what we're really asking. Perhaps the subtext of "live in Jackson County" is actually part of the past decades' shifting relations between management and labor. Perhaps the real encouragement is to treat our jobs as more than jobs, centering our family and social and personal lives around Western...and encouraging employees to live in the area is just one way to, er, encourage that commitment. Perhaps the implication is that "good" academics *should* be here on weekends for Open Houses and athletic breakfasts (complete with sectarian prayer), should be available to our students before eight and after five, should continue advising students and writing recommendations and filling Blackboard shells during periods when nine-month employees are allegedly

“off”, and should compel our families to arrange their lives around these offices. No matter how much we’re doing, *good* academics should be always-here, in order to do more.

If this is the subtext of our ZIP-code-based judgment, it wouldn’t be entirely surprising. This is increasingly the corporate culture of the United States, modeled on the sweatshop culture of the industrial revolution and of countries whose primary growth is in manufacturing. There’s a sense, post-2008 and post-Microsoft, that employees should be so grateful to be employed at all, let alone in a congenial setting, that we should be glad to take on ever more uncompensated work, work that’s not in our job descriptions, and off-duty-hours work. And I’ve heard faculty members say as much. It’s not just a top-down management philosophy; it’s a widespread state of mind, common to academics, in which obsession equals status.

Despite living in Cullowhee, logging a lot of office time, and having one or two tiny obsessive tendencies, I think this is an unfortunate philosophy. If it ever found its way into actual policy, it would be frightening. Always-being-here clearly works for some academics; but it’s not actually part of the job description. (Psychology faculty might be able to tell us whether it’s a description of anything else.) And not-always-being-here has traditionally been one of the benefits helping to balance the student debt and non-earning years which go with terminal degrees, the salaries which remain low relative to both the cost of those degrees and the hours worked, the weekends and evenings spent grading, the “breaks” which include meetings and internship observations, and the vacations which include answering daily work-related e-mails.

I lack space to discuss all the larger implications of always-being-here. But, my colleagues and neighbors, perhaps we should discuss them—over lunch, at Innovations, or perhaps at the U-Joint in Asheville. If we judge colleagues for living in Asheville or for being “never here”, when what we mean is “you’re not *always* here”...we should ask ourselves whether always-being-here is really the work climate we want to foster.

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Editor’s Note – Write for the Faculty Forum!

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

- 1. Lead Commentary.** This is an essay written by a faculty member addressing an issue, hot topic, or general faculty concern. They usually run anywhere from 750 to 1000 words, but they can be longer or shorter.
- 2. Responses.** These are faculty comments about and reactions to the previous months’ FF. They are often substantive, even critical responses to the essay of the previous month. The **Responses** section is a great way to engage in discussion around campus.
- 3. Teaching Tips.** This section can be about an effective teaching method you developed or tips from an article you think worth sharing. If the later, please include the reference.

Email any of the above to me at mherzog@wcu.edu.

Responses to the September Issue, “36 Hours in Greater Cullowhee”

I received enthusiastic email and personal responses to last month’s Faculty Forum. Most of them were expressions of thanks and appreciation. Here is a sample: “Thanks to all of you. I think this is great opening year forum piece—it’s nice, positive, and informational. This could be a great addition to the materials we send new faculty/staff as soon as they are with contract and beginning the sometimes challenging decision about where to live.”

Sneak Preview of the Next Faculty Forum

Finally, here’s a sneak preview of the October issue: Have you wondered and worried about how to meet the needs of all the students in your classes? Stay tuned for the perspectives and insights of a couple of faculty who grapple with how to effectively teach students with disabilities.

Mary Jean Ronan Herzog
Faculty Fellow for Publications

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