The Basic “GURS”: Professors go back to school

By Ann Carlson, Office of Undergraduate Education

History Professor Johann Neem and Geology Professor Pete Stelling do what so many Western faculty do on any given day during the quarter: they teach sections of general education courses, or “GURs”.

Once a year, however, Neem and Stelling—along with four other professors—teach their GURs for an unusual group of students: their colleagues.

Welcome to the GUR mini-courses, where a professor from any department or discipline can hone her or his general education foundational knowledge. One can learn, for starters, how to tell when a volcano is going to blow, why we have the Second Amendment, or gain an overview of microeconomics.

The mini-courses—launched this fall—are the product of the new Faculty GUR Group, which has the goal of encouraging Western faculty to sustain their own general education. In addition to Neem and Stelling, (who founded the group) members include Kendra Douglas (Modern and Classical Languages), Vinit Jagdish (Economics), Julia Sapin (Art History), and Grace Wang (Environmental Studies). Each has developed a “mini-course” that comprises two

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Western Reads

Omnivore’s Dilemma picked as next year’s campus read

Michael Pollan’s acclaimed Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals was chosen by the Western Reads committee as its pick for the 2009 – ’10 year, according to program director Mary Janell Metzger.

The book will be used widely in English 101 and other courses, and distributed to all new Western students.

In his 2006 book, Pollan explores the significance of how we answer the age-old question, “What’s for dinner?” As Pollan argues, “What’s at stake in our eating choices is not only our own and our children’s health, but the health of the environment that sustains life on earth.”

Philosophy Professor Hud Hudson, who advocated for the book as the Western Reads pick, believes it “is a terrific choice” for the program, one that is “certain to surprise, entertain, provoke, and instruct.”

“Michael Pollan’s beautifully written book will provide members of the university community with several opportunities to consider, evaluate, and discuss the wide-ranging consequences of our eating choices and the political, social, environmental, and moral implications of our means of producing those choices,” Hudson explained. Free copies of Omnivore’s Dilemma will be available to all interested faculty. For more information about the program or to participate in planning programs associated with the book, please contact Metzger via email at: Mary.Metzger@wwu.edu or at x/3238.

Western Reads on the web: http://westernreads.wwu.edu
Michael Pollan’s website: http://www.michaelpollan.com/
From the VPUE’s Desk
By Steven VanderStaay, Interim Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education

Esteemed colleagues,

I write to welcome you to Praxis, 2009. A newsletter of professional resources, events, and faculty achievements, Praxis showcases some of the many forms of instructional support found at Western. We’ve made a special effort in this edition to highlight opportunities for faculty to participate in ongoing professional development initiatives, such as the Faculty GUR Group.

Future editions of Praxis will include information on my central initiative for this year: the establishment of a general education assessment plan. Informed by the concerns of Deans and Chairs, as well as our accreditation commission, I have worked with ACC Chair Roger Thompson and the Office of Institutional Assessment, Research, and Testing to review plans successful at other universities.

We will present three such plans to the campus through the ACC and DAC meetings in April, inviting response and feedback. In order to ensure as broad a discussion as possible, the plans will also be posted on the campus community forum.

My principle goal as VPUE is to better match the undergraduate education support programs with the needs of faculty and departments. To this end, I have been visiting with Deans, Chairs, faculty and staff, requesting feedback on how our programs can better serve you. If you have feedback or ideas, please contact me at Steven.VanderStaay@wwu.edu. Include your office hours and I’ll be glad to stop by. —Steve VanderStaay, Interim VPUE

The VPUE Office is committed to supporting excellence in undergraduate education at Western. Programs reporting to the VPUE are the Center for Instructional Innovation, Center for Service Learning, Fellowships Office, First-Year Interest Group (FIG) Program, Honors, Teaching-Learning Academy, Writing Instruction Support, University Catalog, Writing Center, and Women Studies. To learn more, go to: http://www.wwu.edu/depts/vpue/
Teaching Showcase 2009 honors faculty learning communities

By Justina Brown, Center for Instructional Innovation

The Center for Instructional Innovation (CII) will highlight three unique and highly collaborative faculty groups in its upcoming Innovative Teaching Showcase, to be published online in June 2009.

This year’s Showcase theme, “Faculty Learning Communities,” honors members of Western’s and other local communities who are working together, across disciplines, to share and expand their scholarship. A core characteristic of faculty learning communities is a desire to work together for improved teaching and learning. This is often done without compensation, but with the reward of creating a better learning environment for students by increasing engagement, critical thinking skills, learning technologies, and teamwork skills.

This year’s nominees are:

Faculty GUR Group, formed to bring together faculty from different departments across the university to enhance participants’ general education (see full story, pg. 1)

North Cascades and Olympic Science Partnership, led by George “Pinky” Nelson (SMATE). This partnership involves the close interaction of Western faculty, several local community colleges, and 26 school districts to reform science education through teacher professional development, implementation of new curriculum materials, development and support of learning communities in the schools, increasing diversity of new teachers, and improving the science teacher preparation program in higher education institutions.

Center for Education, Equity and Diversity (CEED), led by Kristen French. CEED supports the Woodring College of Education’s mission in its commitment to an education that promotes cultural understanding and social justice in a pluralistic, democratic society.

In addition to multimedia presentations of the respective work of the groups, this year’s Showcase publication will include detailed assessment plans, which are necessary tools to measure each group’s goals and outcomes.

The Innovative Teaching Showcase will be published and celebrated on June 2, 2009 at the “Showcase Learning Event”. For more information, please contact the CII at x7210.

—To see past Showcases, go to: http://pandora.cii.wwu.edu/cii/showcase/default.asp

Smile: You’re on Faculty Focus

If not yet, you might soon be profiled for the new video series, which highlights Western faculty and their research or programs, and will be televised soon.

Faculty Focus was created by Lisa Spicer, (who formerly worked for KCTS in Seattle, and now works part-time for the Vice Provost for Information Technology and is a graduate student), and English Professor John Purdy, with support from faculty governance. Their first effort is a 10-minute video entitled “Faculty Serving Washington,” which will be shown to the State Legislature, and—if more funds can be found—will serve as a pilot for future Faculty Focus profiles. Faculty Focus will air on Western’s Cable Channel 16, Bellingham’s Channel BTV 10, possibly statewide on TVW, and also on the Western website. For more information, contact John.Purdy@wwu.edu, or Lisa.Spicer@wwu.edu

Photo: Lisa Spicer interviews Vehicle Research Institute Director Eric Leonhardt (far left) for Faculty Focus. Video Services Manager Robert Clark (far right) is the Faculty Focus camera man.

Mark your calendars for
ASSessment Week
April 20 – 24

Are your students learning what you want them to in your courses? Are you teaching a large class for the first time, or do you wish to revise an existing course?

Yes? Then plan to attend the workshops or presentations during Assessment Week, slated for April 20-24. Judith Frey, Director of the Instructional Improvement Center at Renton Technical College, will do a workshop on “Small Group Instructional Diagnosis.” Other presenters are our own Western assessment experts, including John Krieg, Director of Survey Research, and Western faculty.

Stay tuned for more details! Assessment Week is sponsored by the Center for Instructional Innovation, Office of Institutional Assessment, Research and Testing, with support from the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education. For more information, contact Karen.Casto@wwu.edu
By Jesse Nelson, TLA student support staff

With news of the economic crisis fresh on their minds, this fall's Teaching-Learning Academy (TLA) participants developed an intriguing and timely study question for this year: How can WE live out our Mission and create a sustainable future at Western that saves money and builds on diversity?

The TLA conversation this winter has ranged from the small things people could do to save money for better learning to pointed suggestions that would sustain both teachers and learners. Many participants have also shared these recommendations directly with Bruce Shepard via the online campus forum, Viking Village. The spirited dialogue and influx of ideas at each dialogue session has demonstrated a strong collective desire to sustain Western's current excellence in teaching and learning despite budget cuts. At the same time, participants have expressed a clear interest in understanding our differences better so we can make the most of our human resources in the face of limited means.

IT’S NOT TOO LATE TO JOIN TLA!
Meetings are bi-weekly in Canada House, and remaining winter quarter meeting times are: Wednesdays, Feb. 25, and March 11 at noon, 2, and 4 pm, and Thursdays, Feb. 26 and March 12, at noon. For more information, email Megan.Otis@wwu.edu. Learn more at the TLA website: http://www.wwu.edu/depts/tla

Faculty - Student Writing Research Fellows investigate scholarly teaching of writing

By Carmen Werder, Director, Writing Instruction Support

Five faculty-student teams are part of a research group studying specific writing instruction practices. They will also present project results during the May 2009 Scholars Week.

The Writing Instruction Support (WIS) Program offers these fellowships, with endorsement from the Vice Provost of Undergraduate Education, in an effort to recognize the scholarly teaching of writing that is already happening at Western and to inform others engaged with this complex work.

Writing teams are:
—Bidisha Biswas (faculty), Rosa Jiminez and Jessica Pemble (students) in Political Science: “Developing writing assignments that address the role of prior knowledge and selective perception.”
—Paul Chen (faculty) and Steve Walker (student) in Political Science: “Use of in-class revision exercises to enhance writing skills.”
—Suzanne Paola (faculty) and Lori Brack (graduate student) in English: “Efficacy of nontraditional writing media and unfamiliar work environments in disrupting entrenched habits of writing that shut down fluency.”
—Margi Fox (faculty) and Jeanne Killgore (student) in English: “Examining the impact of written comments on student writing using a rhetorical framework from professional and technical writing.”
—Jennifer Karchmer (faculty) and Kate Bauer (student) in Communication: “Use of reflective journal writing in promoting a sense of professional identity.”

Want to be a Writing Research Fellow next year? Want to know about writing instruction support? Contact Carmen Werder at x/7329, Carmen.Werder@wwu.edu

PRAXIS is published quarterly throughout the academic year by the Office of the Vice Provost of Undergraduate Education. Created as a forum for faculty and student support professionals on Western’s campus, PRAXIS promotes the exchange of ideas and provides information on upcoming events and topical issues in teaching and learning at the undergraduate level.

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PRAXIS to go paperless
This is the last paper printing of PRAXIS. Beginning with the '09 spring issue, PRAXIS will still cover teaching and learning issues, but be available as a sustainable and economical web publication, located at: http://www.wwu.edu/depts/vpue/Praxis/