

A CENTURY OF RESEARCH AND CREATIVE ACTIVITY AT WKU

The pursuit of new knowledge and new ideas forms the foundation of modern American universities. Very early in its planning for our 100-year celebration, the WKU Centennial Committee decided that research and creative activity must play a central role in our Centennial activities. The Committee wanted the Centennial to leave a permanent legacy of significant academic work — produced by our faculty and staff — that explored the University's heritage. Toward that end, the Committee commissioned a variety of projects including several pieces of music, poetry, works of art, a museum exhibition, and a book, as well as a series of short video essays. Taken together, these projects illustrate the intellectual vitality of WKU in its Centennial year.

The role of research and creative activity in the life of WKU has changed substantially since 1906. For the first half-century or so of its history, WKU placed little emphasis on the importance of producing new knowledge. While the institution promoted academic values throughout its curriculum, the school's culture encouraged faculty members to devote virtually all of their professional time to instruction rather than research and creative activity, an emphasis that faculty members largely endorsed. Most faculty members in this period felt that their primary loyalty lay with the institution rather than their academic discipline, and scholarly research aimed at professional colleagues played little part in life on the Hill. Even as late as 1962, seventy percent of the faculty reported that they had no research publications at all during the previous five years.

Nevertheless, even during these early decades, WKU marked some milestones of scholarship. Not surprisingly, given Western's emphasis on service to the Commonwealth, these early research efforts often focused on local themes. For example, in 1940, long-time history department head Arndt M. Stickles published a



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biography of Confederate General Simon Bolivar Buckner with the University of North Carolina Press. A Hart County native and a governor of Kentucky after the Civil War, Buckner was a natural subject for a WKU historian with a scholarly bent. Stickles' book was one of the first scholarly books published by a WKU faculty member.

Scholarship at WKU received another important boost in the pre-war period thanks to Henry Hardin Cherry's campaign to build the Kentucky Building. Access to materials is a vital component of an active research agenda, and the Kentucky Building represented an early effort by WKU to make

such a collection available for its faculty and students. The idea of developing a special collection of Kentucky materials originated with history department member Gabrielle Robertson in the early years of the Normal School. When she joined the faculty in 1914, Robertson was shocked to find only one book on Kentucky in the school's library. Determined to change this situation, she skillfully set about cultivating potential donors. By the mid-1920s, she had accumulated a considerable amount of material pertaining to the history of the Commonwealth, and she sold President Cherry on the idea of a new building to house the burgeoning collection.

More promoter than scholar, Cherry immediately recognized the community outreach value of such a facility and the significance of making WKU a center for research on the Commonwealth. He launched an aggressive fund-raising campaign, even providing Kentucky school children with tiny banks for accumulating their pennies. Cherry secured funds to start construction, but the Depression dried up the money, leaving the building still unfinished when Cherry died suddenly in August, 1937. Only a few months later, however, a grant from the New Deal's Public Works Administration plus some bank loans got the work started again, and WKU dedicated the long-sought Kentucky Building in November, 1939, on the anniversary of Cherry's birth.

The changes that swept the WKU campus in the 1960s brought a new role for scholarship in the life of the institution. During the 1960s, the baby boom generation fueled an era of dramatic growth that

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transformed Western from a small teacher's college to a large comprehensive University. Between 1965 and 1969, student enrollment grew 41%, passing 10,000 for the first time. Acquiring official university status in 1966 marked a new role for Western and a fresh perspective on its role in the creation of new knowledge.

Naturally such dramatic enrollment growth also fostered a remarkable growth in the size of the faculty. Between 1964 and 1969, WKU added 331 new faculty lines in addition to hires made to replace faculty members who retired or resigned. Compared with the faculty profile of earlier decades, fewer of the newcomers had previous ties to WKU or to the Commonwealth, and more of them held terminal degrees from graduate programs that emphasized research and creative activity. They were far more likely to draw their professional identity from their discipline, and they often measured their professional aspirations by national rather than local standards. Collectively this group ushered in a new era of scholarship at WKU.

In response to this changing tenor, throughout the 1960s WKU made several significant steps toward supporting faculty research. In 1961, WKU created the Faculty Research Committee and charged it to "stimulate faculty research in every way possible." In support of this effort, the fledgling committee received a budget allocation of a thousand dollars for the fall term of 1962. In 1969, the university awarded sabbaticals for the first time, and it began a summer research fellowship program in 1970. During these years, the University also made an effort to recruit faculty members who could provide leadership for these research efforts. As part of the

decade's hiring surge, it recruited some "carefully selected faculty members with established reputation in their fields," who would be expected to serve as catalysts for research and publication. One notable hire from this effort was University Historian Lowell Harrison.

The institution also supported outlets for publishing the results of faculty research. On a local level, the Faculty Research Committee began to publish an annual Faculty Research Bulletin featuring WKU faculty scholarship. The first issue appeared in 1969. WKU also took an active role in creating the University Press of Kentucky, a consortium of academic institutions and scholarly organizations in the Commonwealth committed to publishing scholarly books. The first book published by UPK was written by a WKU faculty member, Professor Ronald Nash of the Department of Philosophy and Religion. Also in 1969, WKU established its first faculty award for Distinguished Contributions to the University in research and creative activity. The first recipient was Mary Washington Clarke, a Folk Studies scholar in the English Department.

During this same period, WKU also placed a growing emphasis on seeking funded research. WKU received its first federal grant in 1958, a National Science Foundation grant for \$5,250. Over the next decade or so, WKU received forty-one NSF grants, forty-seven grants from the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, and eleven National Defense Education Act grants. From that first NSF grant through 1969, WKU had 143 grants and contracts from federal, state, and private sources, collectively totaling over \$11,000,000. Although grants and contracts amounted to a small portion of the University's budget in any given year, their

potential importance was very clear, prompting WKU to establish an office of Grant and Contract Services in 1972. To further celebrate all forms of scholarship, WKU began producing a research magazine, *The Western Scholar*, in 2000.

At the mid-point of its history, in a little over a decade, WKU substantially changed its approach to research and creative activity. They became more central to the role the University saw for itself in society and increasingly important to its funding strategies as well. The Centennial Committee has built on the importance of research and creative activity at WKU. Our intention is to place these basic tools of academic life at the center of a celebration that both explores the past and anticipates the future. As we become a leading American university with international reach, the creation of new knowledge will clearly be at the core of what it means to be a public university in the twenty-first century.

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For more information about the history of research and creative activity at WKU, see Harrison's book, *Western Kentucky University* (University Press of Kentucky, 1987), which was the source for much of the information in this guest editorial.