

100. Scales Tip Back in Favor of Teaching

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Teaching is becoming, once again, a priority in American higher education. After years of feeling the sting of outside critics, academics are now engaged in their own self-examination. And a consensus is emerging that the faculty reward system must give greater recognition to those who teach.

At a recent meeting of the prestigious American Council of Learned Societies, Derek Bok, former president of Harvard, delivered a major address entitled "The Improvement of Teaching." Bok concluded that on many campuses here in the United States, "much teaching is ineffective or uninspired either because instructors spend too little time preparing, or because they are not aware of the ways to motivate, to illuminate, and ultimately to move their students to master a body of knowledge."

Complaints about faculty instruction are not new. As early as 1722, Benjamin Franklin declared that Harvard students "learn little more than how to carry themselves handsomely and enter a room gently (which might as well be acquired at a Dancing School)." Harvard historian Samuel Eliot Morison reports: "... Almost every graduate of the period 1825-1860 has left on record his detestation of the system of instruction at Harvard."

Still, for years teaching was recognized as a central function on the American campus. In the tradition of higher learning, there was the idealized image of the friendly mentor who spent time with students. Teaching was almost universally well regarded and the highest accolade a faculty member could receive was the one given to the clerk at Oxford, "and gladly wolde he lerne, and gladly teche."

Following the Second World War, however, priorities of the professoriate shifted. "With the growth of huge federal grants and scores of academic journals, research has come to dominate all other factors in choosing, recognizing, and rewarding faculty members," is the way Bok describes it.

But now the pendulum is shifting.

Perhaps the most telling signal of the new mood comes from the University of California, where a recently released report by a statewide committee named by president David Gardner, lamented "the exaggerated credit that has been assigned to research." The committee recommended that the university retain a more "appropriate balance," giving greater emphasis to teaching and to service. Although the report has not yet been adopted, the very fact that one of America's most distinguished institutions is now debating the role of the professoriate signals a major shift that may well shape the priorities of the academy for years to come.

The problem should not be over-stated. Carnegie surveys have revealed, time and time again, that a large percentage of the faculty in this country *do*, in fact, prefer teaching to research, and genuinely enjoy the time they spend with students. Professor Francis Oakley, of Williams College, quite appropriately warns against "painting an unfair picture." He underscores the point that we have many colleges in this country where student expectations for teaching are enormously high and where the commitment to the central importance of good teaching is clear, consistent, unwavering, and unambiguous."

Still, there is, as Bok puts it, "ample room for improvement." Professor Sylvia Grider, of Texas A&M, who responded to Bok's lecture, states a conviction that is widely shared: "I firmly believe that the crisis in American higher education is not the curriculum. In the hands of a master teacher, almost any responsible curriculum can be effective. The real crisis is the systematic marginalization of teaching as a result of the pressure to publish at all costs. The best way to put a stop to this pernicious trend and therefore to begin

improving teaching in American higher education is quite simply to recognize and reward faculty for teaching well.”

But why now? How does one explain this shift in a system of faculty recognition and reward that has remained relatively unchallenged for 40 years?

Clearly, the debate about school reform has been a factor. For nearly a decade, Americans have been deeply concerned about the quality of education. Far too many students are not well prepared. And, increasingly, there is a recognition that excellence in education means excellence in teaching - a message that's being heard at every level. Further, college students and their parents are becoming more dissatisfied, recognizing that on many campuses freshmen and sophomores are not well served. Required courses are often overcrowded, with hundreds of undergraduates being taught in large sections by graduate instructors who are pedagogically ineffective. Even worse, teaching assistants from other countries often lack proficiency in English.

Campus leaders are also feeling pressure from government officials. Governors, legislators and auditors - in Mississippi, New York, and Virginia, for example - are surveying faculty work loads to determine how much time professors spend with students. In New York, controller Edward V. Regan called on the state university to develop a formal teaching policy and recommended that all full-time faculty members prepare an annual performance plan. This follows a state study revealing that half of the faculty at the Albany campus spend fewer than nine hours a week in the classroom.

But there is a larger issue - a recognition that priorities of the professoriate have less to do with teaching loads than with the role of the university in society. There is, many believe, a disturbing gap between the campus and the community, a social isolation that reduces the vitality of higher learning and diminishes its credibility. Behind the current debate is a growing feeling that universities must be “in the nation's service,” as Woodrow Wilson put it.

Of course, scholarly interests must be served. But both service *and* teaching are, in fact, integral parts of scholarship. Great teachers create a common ground of intellectual commitment; they stimulate active learning and encourage students to be critical, creative thinkers, with the capacity to go on learning after college.

Thus, in examining the role of the professoriate, universities are, in effect, asking how higher education can more vigorously relate the work of faculty to students as well as urgent social and civic problems. Clearly, a new vision of scholarship is required, one dedicated to the renewal of the academy and ultimately to the renewal of society itself.