

Teaching Awards: A Modest Proposal

The Problem

A change has occurred in the dynamics of teaching awards at WCU. For years the largest prize was the \$1,000 Chancellor's Distinguished Teaching Award. In addition, another thousand dollars or so floated around in smaller college and departmental teaching prizes. This situation changed when state politicians decided that teaching awards were a high profile way to reassure the citizens of North Carolina that our colleges had their priorities straight.

How much money did we hand out this year in teaching awards? More than you think. The Chancellor's Award was demoted to a sort of consolation prize when the UNC system instituted the \$7,500 Board of Governors' Award two years ago. In 1994, the Board directed the General Administration to designate an additional \$6,500 to go to WCU for teaching awards. From this, each of the colleges was given \$1,000 to distribute with a \$2,500 prize given to the department with the best "education beyond the classroom" record.

These one-shot awards, however, pale in comparison with this year's Rewarding Excellency in Teaching initiative in which the legislature dictated that 10% of our 1996/97 salary increases be distributed as teaching awards. At WCU this amounted to \$88,734. These awards are unusual in two respects. First, the funds are added to the winners' base salary. Thus, like sexually transmitted diseases, they are gifts that keep on giving. Second, they represent the spoils of what economists call a zero sum game; the prizes for the winners were essentially deducted from the salary increases of the losers--the majority of the faculty.

The bottom line is that approximately \$103,000 in teaching awards was distributed at Western Carolina University in 1996.

There are ways that we could spend this money that would significantly enhance educational opportunities on campus, but teaching awards are not among them. Indeed, these awards may actually have a deleterious effect on our campus teaching-learning environment. Here are some reasons why:

1. **The selection process is doomed to fail.** Teaching is not like a hot rod race in which the winner is determined by performance on a single variable--whose car is fastest. Ours is a complex multidimensional endeavor. The teaching award selection procedures are based on the assumption that there is a single best teacher in the university. This is false, and, as a result, it is virtually inevitable that the process will be perceived as unfair.
2. **The selection process wastes a lot of time.** One of the finalists for the Board of Governors' Award estimates that it took eight to ten hours of time in documentation, presentations, receptions, etc. Multiply this by the number of nominees and add the many hours spent by the selection committee. I suspect that we are talking about hundreds of hours that might be used

preparing for classes, writing lectures (in the case of Dr. Hale), and drinking coffee with students.

3. **Teaching awards create a large caste of losers.** Most of us have gotten at least one letter that went sometime like, "Dear Professor Smith: Congratulations! The good news is that you have been nominated for the So-On-And-So-Forth Teacher of the Year Award. The bad news is that you were not good enough to win." When it comes to the \$7,500 award, there is one winner and more than three hundred faculty losers--not exactly a morale booster.
4. **Even the winners of big teaching awards lose.** Upon announcement of their achievement they are instantly resented by us jealous losers who mutter, "He or she only got the award because he or she: (a) gave all the students A's; (b) blatantly campaigned for it; (c) benefited from the committee's bias against researchers; (d) got a sympathy vote; or (e) sucked up to the dean."
5. **Awards do not make people become better teachers.** We should strive to be good teachers because it is our job, not because a teaching award is dangled in front of us.

I believe that some teaching awards are more harmful than others. I term this phenomenon Herzog's Principle. It states, "The harm done by teaching awards is directly proportional to their monetary value." Simply put, bigger awards mean bigger problems.

Even awards that start out little can slip unnoticed into the big damage category. For example, each department in my college gives an annual teaching award of \$250. Take out taxes and divide it by 12, and you get enough to purchase a better than average bottle of wine each month for a year. This is not an amount that will cause the winners to take themselves too seriously nor for their colleagues to become too resentful. This year, however, the past winners of this apparently innocuous award received a retroactive bonus of \$1000 that went into their base pay. For a faculty member who stays at WCU for 20 years, this adds up \$20,000, not including the proceeds that accrue from the compounding which is the result of future percentage-based salary increases. This will buy a lot of very good wine.

The Solution

With apologies to Jonathan Swift, I would like to suggest a couple of modest proposals to get us out of the present teaching award mess.

Option 1: Go small. Minimize teaching-award-induced morale problems by insuring that the awards are so small as to do virtually no harm. We can reach this goal by simply allotting all faculty members an equal share of the pot. Each person would be given an award for what he or she is best at. One might be given the Best-Lecture-On-A-Sixteenth-Century-Poet Award, another the Best-Essay-Question Award, etc. I will admit that in some cases we might have to dig pretty deep (Best-Casserole-At-A-Departmental-Luncheon?).

Option 2: Go big--very big. An alternative would be to create a teaching award really worth the aggravation involved by combining all the present awards into one monster prize. This mother of all teaching awards would, like last year's gift from the state legislature, become a permanent addition to the winner's base salary. Here are the mathematics. This year's winner receives a base salary increase composed of the combined total of all the teaching award money given out by WCU. As noted, this year the pot is about \$103,000. Next year, the winner's new base salary will include this \$103,000 raise plus the standard annual merit pay based on a percentage of the new salary. You can probably see where this is going. Suppose that the winner has a 20-year post-award tenure at WCU. Given an average annual salary increase of four percent over this time period, the lifetime value of the teaching award climbs to \$3,324,796.

Now that is an award worth winning. And I suspect that the winner will not really care that the rest of the faculty hates his or her guts.

But can an award of this magnitude be given out fairly? Of course not. Given the difficulty of developing objective criteria for good teaching, I suggest we abandon all pretense that the winner actually deserves the award by holding an annual teaching-award lottery. Unlike the present awards system, allocation by lottery will actually improve faculty morale as the losers would not feel that they are any less adept at teaching than the winner. Plus it offers us hope; we could all be next year's winner.

I will suggest a second alternative for those who find the lottery approach a bit capricious. We can hold what amounts to a playoff series. Each contestant will have 15 minutes to demonstrate his or her pedagogical skill. As in Olympic figure skating, a panel of judges will rate each performance on a 10 point scale. The departmental teach-off winners will go on to the college level. The winners from each college will then compete in a grand event to be held each year during half-time at the WCU-ASU football game. The specter of the best teachers at the university duking it out over a lifetime of financial security would be just the sort of public acknowledgment of good teaching that state legislators love.

Personally, I favor this approach. I have a lecture on the evolution of the sexual orgasm that will knock their socks off.

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