



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

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Teaching Has Always Been # 1: A Dean's Viewpoint

The growing emphasis on excellence in teaching and scholarship involving teaching methods is a healthy development on our campus and nationally as well. However, in the process of destroying old myths academicians seem to be creating new ones which are unnecessary and, from my point of view, untrue. The most recent publication of the Pew Higher Education Research Program, "Back to Business," states several premises as truth which do not seem to be so, based on my experience. I would really like to know if my experience is strange, my memory poor, or my perception flawed, so I present these statements and ask my colleagues for responses.

1. "There is a sad irony in the fact that many of those who pursue graduate study were first inspired in college by a superior teacher who personified the challenges and rewards of intellectual pursuit. The culture of graduate school transforms that passion for discovery and knowledge into a more practical, even cynical concern to carve a niche in a particular specialty. Research, publication, and professional practice, rather than instruction, become primary objectives from an early point in one's graduate training; the necessity of teaching undergraduates in this pressured environment comes to be regarded as a tedious impediment, a necessary but distracting means to secure financial support while earning a doctorate."

Comment: My experience was that I was inspired to teach by an outstanding college teacher. In graduate school I was further inspired. The most admired faculty members in graduate school were the great lecturers, not the great publishers. I was pleased when one of my professors published as I am now when one of my colleagues publishes, but it was never emphasized as the major activity in our vocation. In fact, we were told repeatedly that our primary professional activity would be teaching. Many of us taught freshmen in an atmosphere in which the faculty were supportive, but not directive.

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2. Tenure is not primarily decided on the basis of good teaching.

Comment: This is not an exact quote, but it describes the attitude expressed in this and numerous other articles and statements on good teaching. I have been at Western for nearly 25 years and have served on numerous committees and seen the actions of numerous administrators, and I cannot remember any tenure decision that was not based primarily on teaching ability. Promotion has been treated differently, but the primary consideration for tenure has always been teaching ability.

3. College teachers would be better if they were taught how to teach.

Comment: Again this is not an exact quote but the burden of this section is that, if Ph D. programs had a system for providing pedagogical training and for practice teaching, college teachers would be better. I have never understood this argument. If graduate students can observe and work with outstanding teachers and not be positively affected, taking an additional course is not likely to benefit them. If the above assumption is true, all professors who have degrees in education would be *ipso facto* better than any others.

Are your experiences significantly different?

Cliff Lovin, History

Copies of "Back to Business" and its forerunner, "The Business of the Business," are available upon request from FCTE, 227-7196.

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