



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

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Another Look at Academic Standards

Discussions about the lofty issue of academic standards often disintegrate into gripe sessions, complaining about the quality of our students. From our scholarly perspective, we see our students as unprepared, unmotivated, immature, irresponsible, or un-something-else. We complain that this makes it difficult for us to do our job of educating them. But the standards we set--both for our students and for ourselves--strongly influence how our students perform. Setting impossibly high standards for our students is a waste of everyone's time. We get discouraged and frustrated, our students get discouraged and frustrated, and the educational process breaks down. **But if most of our students cannot attain our standards, either our standards are unreasonable or we have failed to adequately engage and support our students to attain the standard.**

I teach remedial mathematics and general ed. computer literacy. In these classes, I see the weakest of our students and students from all disciplines, but I believe my students reach reasonable academic goals without any sacrifice of high standards. This is because the foundation of my standards is a perspective that keeps me from being discouraged or frustrated about the teaching process.

Let me use an analogy to describe what forms the foundation of my acceptable standards. I do a lot of horseback riding, centering my efforts on a kind of training called dressage (a French word for training). Dressage looks like a series of "tricks" but it is really nothing more than the gymnastic development of the horse as an efficient riding animal. Every time you finish riding any horse, he should be better than he was when you first got on, more well balanced physically, more educated in some way, or maybe just more confident. Just exactly what "better" is depends on what "better" means for that particular horse, and sometimes the biggest challenge is figuring this out. But the goal is always improvement of the individual.

The same is true for me in teaching; my goal is to make my students better than they were when they first entered my class. What makes a good teacher is the ability to assess what you are given, where you need to go, how long you have to get there, and then to decide how to accomplish the task most effectively. Every discipline has its own fundamental content, which must form the framework for standards of learning in that discipline, but getting from the first day of class to the end of the semester requires the ability to honestly estimate the material you have to work with (both students and subject matter) and, day by day, to bring the class along to some acceptable compromise between the absolute standard (the Spanish Riding School for dressage, or MIT for nuclear physics) and the needs and ability of

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the raw material you have to work with. If the quality of our students is less than we might like, then we need to stretch further as teachers to improve them, rather than lowering any standard to accommodate weaker students.

Some teachers balk at accepting the responsibility for judging what the "acceptable compromise" is, so they ask a textbook or a curriculum committee to make an absolute decision for them. Unfortunately, neither the textbook authors nor the committee can be inside every classroom. Each instructor must have the confidence to make minor adjustments in course content if the adjustments improve learning for an individual or a class and do not compromise overall quality. Sometimes, teachers have difficulty making an honest estimate of their students' abilities because they confuse a judgment about their students with a judgment about themselves. They do not want to acknowledge their own estimates of student abilities because their estimate might really challenge their teaching skills; they would rather pontificate about their chosen subject. Nonetheless, making an honest estimate of student abilities, having the confidence to judge the acceptable compromise in goals, and being able to invite our students to reach the goals is what the teaching part of our job is all about.

We all need to accept the critical responsibilities that are part of teaching, and we must constantly monitor and develop our own ability to handle these responsibilities. Teaching skill requires a development based on experience; it is not something that comes completely naturally, even to the greatest of scholars. The growth of the teaching part of our scholarship does not come from doing research, from committee work, or from studying and lecturing about our favorite subject. It comes from making a commitment to the act of teaching, which is to inspire learning in others. It requires a willingness to get to know, and to respect, those we seek to teach. To be successful, we need an honest understanding and acceptance of where we are undertaking this task, and with whom, and we must believe it is worth the effort.

Every student who will succeed at Western is genuinely worth the effort because each deserves the chance to become better than he or she would have been without us; we owe it to our own future to make sure that they do. Even those who eventually will not succeed deserve the chance to experience that decision honestly for themselves. Accepting and valuing our students must be a foundation of our academic standards. If we then make a true commitment to the process of teaching, which is nothing more than to improve our students, and if we believe in the process and in our ability to facilitate it, I think we will find that the standards will take care of themselves.

Nory Prochaska, Coordinator of the Math Tutoring Resource Center

••••• **•Editor's Call for Responses•** •••••

If you would like to respond to Nory's opinion piece, please send your comments either to Nory at 314 Stillwell or to Terry Nienhuis at the FCTE, 161 Hunter Library. Please indicate whether you are willing to be quoted or prefer to remain anonymous.