



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

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Teaching is Dead Last, or Worse: A Faculty Viewpoint

I can agree, in part, with Cliff Lovin's **Faculty Forum** opinion piece, "Teaching Has Always Been #1." Those of you who know me understand that I am very reluctant to disagree with a dean, but there are some points I must take issue with.

I can wholeheartedly agree with Dean Lovin's assertion that faculty are primarily interested in teaching. This assertion is strongly supported by research data. In Ernest L. Boyer's 1989 "The Condition of the Professoriate," 77% of his respondents from comprehensive universities report that their primary interests lean toward or are primarily in teaching. Furthermore, similar results are reported by the "Higher Education Research Institute Faculty Survey" (HERI), which WCU faculty participated in during the 1989-1990 academic year. Seventy-nine percent of responding WCU faculty report that their primary interest is in teaching. Eighty-one percent report that student intellectual development is of high or of the highest priority. Eighty percent respond that creating a positive undergraduate experience is a high or of the highest priority. Ninety-eight percent think that being a good teacher is very important or essential.

However, I must disagree with Dean Lovin when he claims that teaching is valued or rewarded on an institutional level. According to Boyer's "Condition of the Professoriate," 65% of faculty at comprehensive universities agree that it is difficult to achieve tenure if one does not publish, even though 68% of those same faculty also agree that teaching effectiveness should be the primary criterion for promotion of faculty (note the mixing of promotion and tenure issues). Additionally, 71% comment that the number of publications is very or fairly important in granting tenure. At the same time, 41% of comprehensive university faculty agree that the pressure to publish reduces the quality of teaching at their universities and 79% agree that at their institutions they need better ways, besides publication, to evaluate the scholarly performance of faculty. In the HERI survey 32.1% of the responding WCU faculty agree strongly or somewhat strongly that research interferes with teaching.

The most definitive evidence that we do not value teaching institutionally is that we do a very poor job of assessing it. With very few exceptions we do not use the best available scholarship to assess teaching. The scholarship is available but it is time consuming, and apparently threatening, to attempt to measure what most of us say is the purpose of our lives, teaching. In fact, much of what passes for teaching evaluation violates the basic tenets of the methodology and statistics we teach in our classrooms. Think about the vast system that is in place to review and publish journal articles. Now compare that to the system we use to evaluate teaching. Which is demonstrably the most important?

Dean Lovin comments that in tenure decisions at WCU teaching is always important. I have only been here for fifteen years but I have served on numerous TPR Committees,

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including a three year term on the University Tenure and Promotion Committee, and my experience is different from Dean Lovin's. In my view, teaching was almost never a major consideration in tenure decisions. The only issue was whether or not a person was a bad teacher, not whether or not he or she was a good teacher. In many instances teaching was not even considered. It is difficult for some of us to believe that teaching is important in tenure decisions, and other personnel decisions, when we see people tenured who miss up to 20% of their scheduled classes. Faculty who miss a substantial number of their scheduled classes are promoted, reappointed, and awarded merit raises.

Dean Lovin's observation that graduate students observe and work with outstanding teachers is interesting. I remember three outstanding teachers in my varied educational experience. One was a chemistry teacher, one an English teacher, and one a history teacher, all at the undergraduate level. While my graduate school faculty were subject-matter experts they were not outstanding teachers. (The two exceptions I was aware of taught in other schools.) The reward system did not reward people for teaching at that graduate institution; rather it punished faculty who "wasted their time" at such efforts. A graduate student observing her professor was likely to learn a disregard for undergraduate students and a disdain for any serious efforts at teaching.

Finally, however, I agree with Cliff's skepticism about courses in pedagogy solving the teaching problem. Unfortunately, I think, he misses the point. We are not going to teach faculty to be good teachers by having them attend a course in how to teach because the issue is far more complex; the solution lies in a long-term faculty development process. Teaching/learning is a two-way street and faculty need to learn from students how students learn. Faculty need to be able to "see" and "make sense out of" what is going on in their classrooms so they can adapt what they do to fulfill content objectives, student needs, and faculty responsibilities. And faculty need to learn as much about themselves as they need to learn about students. They need to develop the skill to respond and adapt to the dynamics of the teaching/learning relationship. This necessitates that faculty become aware that such a process is going on around them, and this understanding will not come from a course in pedagogy.

Cliff, thank you for the conversation.

Bill Kane, Management & Marketing

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