

WCU and Teaching for the Twenty-first Century

When I think of quality teaching and its impact on education for the Twenty-first Century, I think initially of several important dimensions.

First, quality teaching focuses on what the students learn. We know that people generally learn better when they are active rather than passive learners, so the course should be structured to assure that there are active learning opportunities. As the structure and sheer volume of knowledge changes, we increasingly need to focus our courses on ways of knowing, critical thinking, communicating, and independent and group learning. Technology should also be appropriately integrated into the course to assist the student in meeting the educational goals for the class. Finally, we know that people tend to do better at whatever task they undertake if they feel accepted, respected, and valued. Therefore, Western's tradition of "excellence with a personal touch" seems to address both the intellectual and affective needs of students when (and if) that tradition guides our teaching.

Second, high quality teaching can be expected to have very little impact on a student unless it is part of a coherent program or curriculum. The individual course, while important, is simply a brick in the structure of the student's education. Each brick may be sound and well-made, but a structure is formed by placing these well-made bricks in appropriate relationship to one another. The quality of the individual class is enhanced and magnified by being part of a coherent plan of study in which each course has a relationship to the others and where the goals of the program are clearly linked to specific courses and course sequences. We should, as a program faculty, be able to explain to each other what our program is about and how each part of it contributes to our students' learning.

Third, quality teaching for the Twenty-first Century will have a values and behavioral component. The current generation of students has too many members who are "lost" and who do not have a focused sense of values. This seems to be associated with self-abusive behaviors (such as binge drinking and drug use), abuse of others (e.g., date rape), relatively low self respect, and a focus on making money at the expense of other values. [See The Abandoned Generation by William Willmon and Thomas Naylor for an excellent discussion of these issues.] This is not meant to be a condemnation of these students as individuals or as a generation, but merely an observation on the current situation. Therefore, in addition to the more traditional liberal arts and subject matter skills, student-learning-centered teaching will include several specific core educational values. Students will be expected to understand that they are responsible for their own behavior and the effects of that behavior on others. Students will also

be helped to understand the importance of a sense of commitment since commitment is a fundamental requirement for academic achievement. Finally, students will be expected to work with integrity and a sense of personal and professional ethics. We expect these values of our colleagues in our community of scholarship; we should expect no less from our students.

In the current environment, it is not enough for us to assert that our programs are of high quality; we must be able to document that they are. This means that we need to be able to document what our graduating students are capable of doing. This is the fundamental issue underlying assessment of seniors. In my recent meetings with President Broad, she indicated that she felt that our beginning work in assessment of senior-level skills was the most important university-level work in which we were engaged. I agree.

There are at least two philosophical approaches to senior-level assessment that might be considered under the heading of “portfolio assessment.” Traditional portfolio assessment involves the development of a longitudinal record of an individual student’s performances over time. Materials in the portfolio document the growth and development of the student and, when used by a skilled advisor, portfolios can assist in directing the student’s education. An alternative model has appeared relatively recently in the literature. In this approach, the academic program is taken as the unit of analysis (rather than the individual student) and the portfolio is developed at the program level rather than at the level of the individual student. Portfolio contents might include class syllabi, copies of tests and assignments, and a representative collection of the outcomes of students’ work that documents that the goals and objectives of the program are being met. Minimally, documents should show that students know the subject matter and methods of the field; that they can write at an appropriate collegiate level; that they can use technology and other information systems to address the problems of the discipline; that they can think critically about the issues of the discipline; and that, where appropriate, they can use mathematics to solve problems of the discipline.

What also is interesting about this form of program assessment is that, when done well and over time, it gives much of the most critical information needed by the faculty for strategic planning and departmental reporting. When coupled with a clear view of the program faculty’s needs and interests in research, scholarly development, and service, it becomes the strategic plan. Therefore, from a workload and reporting perspective, the senior-level assessment program could take the place of most departmental strategic planning and it also could meet our ongoing requirements by SACS for both assessment and planning.

A final note with regard to teaching. Western is moving rapidly to the forefront nationally in our ability to apply technology to teaching and learning. As a faculty, your work in this area is exemplary. We need to keep this momentum. We have set high standards and are teaching courses at the appropriate level. Our electronics capabilities are the envy of the UNC system (though we know that there is much more we need to have available). We can develop a graduate who is capable of competing with any in the country. We have the faculty and, increasingly, we will have the facilities. Individuals and departments are making great strides. What we need to do is to continue to work together to create a more coherent student-learning-centered educational program. Let’s “stay the course.”

John Bardo, Chancellor

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