

# *Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence*

## **Responses to Dan Fredricks**

Dan Fredricks put my feelings into thoughts and then into words. It is so easy to let the students' overconcern for grades infect our own thinking so that we lose sight of the real goal--learning--and how to bring it about. Jim Eison's research on learning orientation versus grade orientation shows that most students are grade-oriented. Most faculty he has studied are learning-oriented, or at least they think they are, or at least, as students, they were.

My own view is that grades are a necessary evil in this system, but it drives me crazy when a student interrupts to ask "how much does this count?" or "will this be on the test?" Of course, students have a right to know how they will be judged. Nevertheless, and especially in general education courses that emphasize skills and ways of thinking rather than specific content, I am more interested in what is happening in and out of class than in how I am going to grade it.

But how many of our practices as faculty subtly encourage a concern for grades over learning? Do we have policies that are more punitive--designed, perhaps, to demonstrate our authority--than productive of learning? How do we not only teach but invite students to learn? Dan's questions invite his students to shed unproductive baggage that might get in the way of their education; I hope his students' answers can invite us to ask what unproductive baggage we are putting in their way.

*Elizabeth Addison, English*



Dan Fredricks' opinion piece is very suggestive and reminds me that achieving high academic standards requires teachers--not only students--to rise to the challenge. It is facile and counterproductive to say that education will improve if only the students will get better. Demanding good students before you test your mettle as a teacher is a sign that your teaching is little more than ego gratification. Education will improve when students get better, but it will also improve enormously if **teachers** get better, and given the effect our diseased culture has on our students, it looks like teachers are going to have to make the first move.

Empirical research has demonstrated that over 90% of university faculty think of themselves as being **above average**. This is obvious nonsense and we would hoot at it if students said it about themselves. There is lots of room for teachers to improve, and achieving high academic standards is not synonymous with demanding that students make better grades; high academic standards starts with increasing the wisdom and expertise of teachers. If what we are asking our students to do is stupid, we shouldn't be surprised, angered, or disappointed if our students then seem to be stupid.

And our responsibilities as teachers begins, as Dan implies, with the personal rapport we build in the classroom. Many teachers will look skeptically on the assertion that teachers must treat students gently, respecting their insecurities and the power of their emotional lives. Some who are cold, distant, and even verbally abusive would go so far as to assert that detachment and/or confrontation is an acceptable style or even the essence of good teaching. Dan's anecdote about first day fears in freshmen makes it clear that this kind of behavior will not do, that good teaching starts with the communication of a real caring about students, and that high academic standards are not achieved simply by encouraging teachers to carry a whip and chair into the classroom to demand more impressive tricks from more frightened students.

*Terry Nienhuis, English*