

# *Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence*

## **Responses to Cliff Lovin**

When I was a graduate student at the University of Michigan, the first time I was a teaching assistant I felt very much that I had been thrown in at the deep end. The only instructions I received related to the reading list and the location of my classes. Without any forum for discussion of teaching or teaching methods, and with the sense that the faculty was not particularly interested in the problems of teaching anyway, many teaching assistants suffered from poor morale while their classes were not getting the kind of instruction they deserved. From conversations with other friends at similarly huge, research-oriented institutions, this situation seemed rather common. There is nothing wrong with Dean Lovin's memory or perception, but he and all other Western faculty members ought to understand (and appreciate) that Western's emphasis on teaching is indeed unusual.

*Gael Graham, History*

My experience at other institutions leads me to believe that research, publication, and professional practice, rather than teaching ability, are the primary criteria for hiring and promotion. At other schools, I have not seen teaching ability play much of a role unless the teaching is very poor. Although tenure may be decided at Western on the basis of good teaching, again, my experience is that teaching ability is usually not a major consideration in granting tenure. Finally, I believe the quality of teaching at the college level could be improved through instruction in graduate school. I would, however, suggest a guiding teacher approach--where an effective teacher works with a graduate student on a one-to-one basis--rather than taking courses on teaching.

*Roy Sumpter  
Human Environmental Sciences*

I'm not sure that teaching ability has always been the primary consideration for tenure at WCU. In my own particular case, it must have been, because I had only two publications! However, I have heard that there are some tenured professors whose teaching ability is "suspect," to put it mildly. How did they get tenure if teaching ability has always been the primary consideration?

*Ralph Triplette, Geosciences*

A recently published colleague would not mind me using the following to get my point across: "those who seek to separate teaching from scholarship do not understand their intricate interdependence (research, teaching, service). How does one transmit the knowledge if one doesn't know it? How does one decipher what is important if one has not developed an understanding of disciplined inquiry and a critical stance towards assertions and claims? Scholarship is as important to quality teaching as teaching is to the development of excellent practicing professionals. One cannot be achieved without the other . . . . A profession cannot achieve greatness without a continuing commitment to an increased quality and quantity of scholarly endeavors. And the professor is at the forefront of those individuals best prepared to do research."

The December 5th Chronicle of Higher Education states that scholarship has four components--the discovery of new knowledge, the integration of knowledge, the application of knowledge, and teaching. And if these are not enough to convince you I offer a quote from Saltman in Distinguished Teachers on Effective Teaching (Jossey-Bass): "how can I teach if I do not learn? How can I learn if I do not teach? Scholarship and pedagogy are the yin and

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yang of my life. For me, they are one and the same." Faculty, especially those who are nontenured, are given mixed signals. They are told that teaching, service, AND RESEARCH are all required for tenure. Yet the faculty who wish to do research are chastised by those who don't. We are accused of not carrying the load if we aren't teaching at least 12 hours. Yet, these heavy teaching and advising loads don't allow us to get any research done. It would be nice if those who choose not to participate in all facets of scholarship would allow those of us who wish to fully accept all parts of the tripartite responsibility to do so. I myself would like to be a specialist in one or two courses than a master of none.

I did not take the time to look up where Dr. Lovin did his graduate work. I received a Ph.D. (not an Ed.D.) from a research institution. I was told very pointedly that if I did not plan on doing research that I was wasting my time. "The Ph.D. is a research degree."

Oh, by the way. The colleague who wrote the first paragraph is known for his outstanding teaching. *Anonymous*

Perhaps Dean Lovin's opinion piece was meant to be tongue-in-cheek. Perhaps not. Whatever, my experience indeed has been different from his and much closer to the description from the Pew report that he finds inaccurate. My graduate program in child psychology did have a supervised teaching internship, ineffective at it might have been, but there was absolutely no question about what was really valued: research, and most especially publishable research. Those offering jobs agreed. For me and my fellow graduate students, the correlation between the number of publications during graduate

school and job offers must have been at least +.80 (for those not statistically inclined, very high).

More to the point is my experience at WCU. In the last 12 years, I have read close to 1,000 letters of recommendation from graduate school advisors. I estimate that the proportion of words in those letters concerning research, teaching, and collegiality would be 80%, 2%, and 18% respectively. And I think I can pretty accurately paraphrase the 2% that focuses on teaching: "although I have never actually seen Candidate X teach, I am sure that s(he) will do an excellent job."

Furthermore, our Faculty Handbook says that our teaching load is 12-15 hours per semester, but the actual average teaching load in most departments is considerably lower than 12 hours and in some departments it is as low as 5-6 hours (not counting independent study courses and the ubiquitous "phantom" sections for which there is no enrollment). Increasingly, new and some not so new faculty members expect lighter teaching loads and more "release" time for research (don't you get "released" from jail?). And there is lots of other evidence of a "flight from teaching." Teaching is #1 in the hearts of many, even most, college professors, but it is not #1 in the status-oriented system of American higher education.

My personal experience at WCU is that being a good teacher is neither necessary nor sufficient to achieve tenure. Fortunately, most of us who have been tenured are adequate teachers, but I am considerably less sanguine than the Dean about our record. More importantly, Cliff admits that promotion is measured by different criteria. I feel that this is very significant. Although promotion is less important to the individual's future than tenure, I think that the criteria for promotion are more important to the values of the institution. When a respected, scholarly teacher cannot be

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promoted to full professor because of the absence of publications, teaching cannot be considered to be #1.

Finally, just a few thoughts about Cliff's non sequitur on the skills of education professors. Most education professors received their graduate training from the same cadre of research institutions as did the rest of us. They, too, learned what really "counts." Education professors also are not any better than the rest of us at practicing what we preach. Even in schools of education, teaching is not always #1.

*Bruce Henderson, Psychology*



I must support the statement, "college teachers would be better if they were taught how to teach." Well, make that qualified support: being taught and being able to apply are two different things. But I agree that graduate students in any discipline could benefit from a methods course and certainly a testing and measurement course if they are planning (or needing) to teach.

We have all experienced terms of torture with faculty who

- had no syllabus or
- had a syllabus but added course requirements at a moment's notice;
- read their lectures from the text or
- never referred to the text;
- put the entire class to sleep--consistently;
- wrote test questions that were unclear or
- derived from obscure sources or
- refused to review test questions or
- refused to give rationales for "right" answers, or
- put grades on papers without any other feedback as to how the grade was achieved;
- et cetera.

Some of these people were brilliant researchers or practitioners in their fields. They just didn't know (or care to know?) how to teach.

How many teaching assistants sit down with their supervising professors and receive regular guidance about the mechanics of "outstanding teaching"? Even if this happens more often than I think it does, would it not be a better use of those outstanding teachers' time to have at least a required interdisciplinary graduate seminar on the process of teaching before TA's are turned loose to practice on innocent undergraduates? Do graduate faculty expect their research assistants to function without any prior knowledge of the research process?

Maybe it doesn't matter how "outstanding teaching" is learned. Maybe a mentorship model does work, if the mentor takes the time for it. Maybe I'm just suspicious, coming as I do from a discipline that has historically suffered from an apprenticeship model where students were exploited for their service. But I submit that any job, and especially teaching, needs a formal introduction to its processes as well as its content.

And once the new graduate is out there looking for a teaching job at the college level, does anyone assess her or his ability to teach? If "good teaching" is the basis for tenure at a university, should it not also be a requirement for being hired in the first place? Shouldn't an applicant's live demonstration of teaching ability carry at least as much weight as a curriculum vitae loaded with publications and grants? Who do we expect will carry the burden of the inexperienced teacher? Should universities require a teaching process seminar of all new faculty who cannot demonstrate at least the basic elements of pedagogy? And how did some of the duds (see paragraph 2, above) get tenure in the first place?

*Sharon Jacques, Nursing*