

# *Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence*

Response to "Measuring Student Learning By Measuring Behavioral Changes," by Sharon Jacques, 11/1/95

Sharon Jacques's Faculty Forum piece is well thought out. Like her, I would hope students would become community oriented. However, sometimes I wonder if it is not a good thing that there are limits to measurement.

While Sharon argues for behavioral measurement of things like public service, I think we must use measurements of cognitive as well as behavioral change and remain skeptical of them at the same time. In educating for creativity and even encouraging the student to be a rebel, I am reminded that Albert Einstein was very divergent in his thinking and could not get a job in academia until his theories received some verification and he had received the Nobel Prize.

Too often we test for convergent thinking rather than encouraging divergent thinking. Even in science the gradual change theory of the universe was conventional wisdom until quite recently. Suddenly thinking has shifted. William Faulkner could not manage in academic classes at the University of Mississippi and, failing to graduate, took a job at the Post Office. I am not sure if Faulkner thought about public service in the traditional sense, but he became a genius in literature and by doing what he did best ultimately served the public interest.

Diversity protects us from agreeing on all matters in academia and pluralism sometimes protects us from all faculty measuring the same behavioral elements. We must measure behavioral cognitive changes, we must evaluate, and we are even stuck with outcomes assessment (which likewise has its merits), but something must protect divergent thinking at universities. What is politically correct today may not be politically correct tomorrow, and the young rebel today who defies public service conventions may in the final analysis serve us best in the long run by marching to a different drummer. In the movie, The Shawshank Redemption, we see the rebel in prison, who gives us all a moment of redemption by playing classical music for the inmates. While universities and prisons are totally different and not even comparable, even the worst institutions can only be redeemed by rebels; likewise it is my belief that universities and societies are only redeemed by the rebel thinker.

At universities we value the divergent thinker and rebel student, but we must evaluate them by conventional standards even though their cognitive behavior does not fit the norm. One wonders how they will go about serving the public or even if they will. So I for one am glad there are limits to measurement and limits to consensus. I am not disagreeing with Sharon but stressing a different dimension to academic measurement. Since there are few platonic philosopher Kings or Queens, we need to retain a certain skepticism toward measurement, recognize its limits and possibly realizing that if the intellectual giants had been measured by very exacting standards of conventional knowledge they might not have prospered, especially if they had been measured by conventional definitions of public service. Measure twice and cut once is an often repeated adage. We must be cautious in measuring lest we make the wrong decision.

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